HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JUNE 2017)

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Hywel Williams: There is a great deal of support for the principles of universal credit. However, the roll-out has been characterised as “operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving”.

These are not my words, but those of Sir John Major. If the Secretary of State will not postpone the roll-out—along with many other right hon. and hon. Members, I would like him to consider that again—will he consider two other remedies: to drop the waiting period, and to allow the benefit to be paid fortnightly?

Mr Gauke: Let me be clear: as I touched on earlier, the evidence so far shows that those who go on to universal credit are more likely to be working six months later than they would be had they been on the legacy benefits, and they are also more likely to be progressing in work. That is really important, and it is not something that I want to deny people. I believe that we should roll out something like this gradually and sensibly, and make changes as and when necessary, but that is exactly what we are doing.

Mr Carmichael: Those of us who remember the chaos around the introduction of tax credits can see the good sense in a phased, gradual introduction to universal credit. However, I have to say to the Secretary of State that if we do not learn the lessons from the pilots, we frankly risk losing any advantage that we will gain. Some 57% of applicants for universal credit are having to borrow money before their first payment. Is not that alone enough to justify a pause?

Mr Gauke: The system of advances is an integral part of the system. It has always been there, but we want to make that properly available. Nobody who needs support should have to wait six weeks before they receive any support. What we are doing is making it clear that people can receive an advance of their first month’s payment, which is then deducted over the next six-month period. That is helping people deal with cash-flow issues in that first month, which I think is a sensible and pragmatic response.
Mohammad Yasin: A recently bereaved constituent of mine, a working single parent, has seen her income reduced by £300 a month since transferring to universal credit. For her, work does not pay. Will the Secretary of State urgently review the link between agreement to support payments and universal credit, and will he stop the roll-out until he has done so?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman says that work does not pay. Let us be clear: universal credit always means that it is worth working an extra hour and worth taking a pay rise. It is always worth working more under universal credit, which was not the case with the legacy benefits. That is why the evidence is suggesting that people do work more and do work more hours than they do under the legacy systems.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons why more people have gone out to work this morning than ever before in our nation’s history is that we as a Government have not ducked the challenge of welfare reform, we do not let people languish for years on out-of-work benefits, and universal credit is an essential part of the welfare reform programme?

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It has been the consistent policy of this Government—including under my predecessors, such as my right hon. Friend—to ensure that we have a welfare system that puts work at the heart of it. That is one of the reasons why we have record levels of employment, as he so rightly says.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): No. 7, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, the hon. Gentleman was standing up on No. 1 and he has a very similar question, so he can unburden himself of his important thoughts now.

7. [901039] Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It has been the consistent policy of this Government—including under my predecessors, such as my right hon. Friend—to ensure that we have a welfare system that puts work at the heart of it. That is one of the reasons why we have record levels of employment, as he so rightly says.

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight that point. As I said last week, we are refreshing the guidance to DWP staff to ensure that people who need support—who will struggle to get through to the end of the assessment period without financial support—have access to that money quickly. Increasing the eligibility for advance payments is one of the best ways in which we can address some of the concerns that have been raised and learn from that experience.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Although I believe that advance payments are treating the symptoms rather than the cause, I welcome the Secretary of State’s additional guidance to make sure that jobcentres offer them. Advance payments cover roughly two weeks’ worth of money: what support is in place for people waiting three, four, five, six or seven weeks?

Mr Gauke: The level of advance payments of 50% is, we believe, the right balance between getting support to people early in the process—they can get it very quickly—and ensuring a reasonable level of deduction for that advance payment in subsequent months. Clearly, this is an issue that we will continue to look at, but 50% strikes the balance. I welcome my hon. Friend’s support for that announcement.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Rent arrears, food poverty and in-work poverty have all rocketed in areas where universal credit has been rolled out. The third sector has united to join in our call for universal credit to be halted, and we know that pressure is mounting on the Conservative Back Benches for that to happen. Is not the Secretary of State’s apparent climb-down on crisis loans and advance payments an admission that universal credit is failing?

Mr Gauke: Not at all. I come back to the point that universal credit is giving more people the opportunity to get into work and progress in work. The personalised support that is provided by jobcentres where universal credit has been rolled out is proving to be effective. To those people who call on me to stop the process, I say that once fully rolled out, universal credit is likely to mean that 250,000 more people will be in work than would otherwise have been the case. I will not deny those people that opportunity.

Neil Gray: The Secretary of State is either desperately deluded or ignorantly incompetent. In one of the areas in which universal credit has been rolled out, East Lothian Citizens Advice reports that more than half of its clients on universal credit are worse off by an average of £45 a week. The just under a third who are better off have gained just 34p a week. How much more evidence of social destruction will it take for the Secretary of State to have the strength to halt the roll-out?

Mr Gauke: Universal credit is adding to what the Government have already been doing—ensuring that work is at the heart of welfare. That is why we have 3 million more jobs than we did in 2010. Welfare reform is part of the reason for that, and it is part of the reason why we will continue to press on with reforming the welfare state to encourage work and help people to progress in work.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May I warmly welcome advance payments within five days and immediate needs payments the same day as a definite step forward? Given the reasonably high levels of adult illiteracy and poor computer skills in some areas, can the Secretary of State say something about how volunteers might be able to work alongside personal advisers to help people fill in the application form in the first place?

Mr Gauke: It is important that people filling in forms receive the necessary support, but jobcentre staff provide that support. Voluntary organisations may be able to assist, but Jobcentre Plus staff are already giving the intensive support necessary to help people to complete the applications.
Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Given the Secretary of State’s confidence in the roll-out of universal credit to another 150 Jobcentres Plus, can he give the House a guarantee that none of our constituents will face hunger or near destitution through lack of money over the Christmas period?

Mr Gauke: Universal credit is about ensuring that our constituents are in a stronger financial position. That is what we are trying to deliver by enabling them to work and providing the support they need. As I said earlier, if we look at where we want to get to by 2022, 8% of claimants are already on universal credit and by January it will be 10%. The process is gradual and measured, and that is enabling us to learn from the experience and make improvements, which we will continue to do all the time.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I support universal credit and its roll-out, but I am concerned about applicants with zero savings who, if they lose money for one or two weeks, have nothing to fall back on. Will the Department consider the possibility of jobcentres writing supportive letters to landlords to explain the situation in which benefit claimants find themselves, because the worst outcome for applicants is that they lose their home?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There is an obligation on social landlords, given the source of income through universal credit, to work constructively with tenants. If a tenant has a reasonable expectation of receiving housing costs as part of their universal credit payment but has not yet received them, the landlord should not take action and the tenant should not face risk of eviction.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As we have heard, universal credit is costing debt, rent arrears, and even homelessness up and down the country, with many claimants already in work. Given that housing associations are saying that over 80% of rent arrears are down to UC, and that the Mayor of Greater Manchester is predicting that rough sleeping will double as a result of UC roll-out, how many more families does the Minister estimate will face hunger or near destitution through lack of money over the Christmas period?

Mr Gauke: Let us be clear: no one needs to go six weeks without financial support when there is a system of advances in place. I make the point to all right hon. and hon. Members that if they are aware of constituents who have not received an advance, they can make it clear to them. Let us be realistic: the fact is that we are now moving towards a welfare system that does not put in place barriers to work and does enable people to make progress. It is no good Labour Members saying they are in favour of the principles, but then trying to obstruct the delivery of a reform that will give 250,000 more people a job.

Investment and Pension Scheme Charges

2. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the level of fees and charges applied to investments and pension schemes by asset managers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Chancellor on a range of issues. The Department has had specific discussions with both the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority on the FCA’s proposed remedies in this area, and our plans to ensure that details of these costs and charges are published and given to pension scheme members.

Kelvin Hopkins: Is not the reality that for millions of ordinary people the only way to guarantee a sufficient income in retirement is a good state pension together with a state earnings-related pension scheme for all, with defined contributions and defined benefits?

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will be aware that auto-enrolment has reversed the decline in work-based pension saving, with 8.5 million people signed up and further progress to be made. The reality is that, by reason of the coalition and this Government, we have a new state pension that is worth £1,250 more than in 2010.

Pension Arrangements for Women

3. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on improving pension transition arrangements for women born in the 1950s.

Guy Opperman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I can only repeat the answer I just gave: the Government do not intend to revisit the state pension age arrangements for women born in the 1950s.

14. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on improving pension transition arrangements for women born in the 1950s.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Chancellor, but the Government will not be revisiting the state pension age arrangements for women born in the 1950s that are affected by the Pensions Acts of 1995, 2007 and 2011.

David Hanson: My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and I, Members of the Minister’s own party, and all Opposition parties in this House, including the Democratic Unionist party, have introduced a Bill, to be debated on 27 April, to provide for transitional arrangements to be put in place. Will the Minister support the Bill? If not, will he tell the House why not?

Guy Opperman: I can only repeat the answer I just gave: the Government do not intend to revisit the state pension age arrangements for women born in the 1950s who are affected by the Pensions Acts of 1995, 2007 and 2011. The cost would be in excess of £70 billion.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister will be aware that, following the Brexit vote, bond yields dropped by 30%, increasing the public sector pensions bill by a hefty 30% to £1.8 trillion over the last year. Is this latest example of Government ineptitude the real reason WASPI women are being ignored, penalised and denied their pensions?
Guy Opperman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, but if her Government in Scotland disagree with any aspect of the UK Government’s welfare reforms, they have the powers to do something about it. I refer her to the letter of 22 June from Jean Freeman, my opposite number, which specifically discusses the uses of Scotland Act powers to address individual cases.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Will the Minister clarify whether, if the law on the state pension age were changed to favour women over men, it would be discriminatory or illegal?

Guy Opperman: The reasons for the original changes were the changes in life expectancy and equality law. If the law proposed by Labour were to approach men and women differently, it would—with respect—be highly dubious as a matter of law.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will the Minister further clarify that point? Labour says that the previous pension age could come back and that we could return to a situation where men are discriminated against. Does he agree that such discrimination might be profoundly against the law?

Guy Opperman: Those who seek to make the case for such a law would need to satisfy themselves that men would not bring a case against the proposers, because it would unquestionably create a new inequality between men and women.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The ombudsman’s first rulings on whether the Government are guilty of maladministration for failing to give 50s-born women sufficient notice of their earlier retirement age are due soon. Maladministration or not—it will take years to resolve that matter—can I ask the new Minister to take this back, think again, tell us what he is prepared to do, and what research he is prepared to do, to alleviate their misery, and perhaps even consider our proposals on pension credit and allowing them to retire up to two years earlier?

Guy Opperman: The Government strongly believe that there has been no maladministration by the Department for Work and Pensions, including during the 13 years when Labour was in charge of the Department.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Is the new state pension not in fact removing injustices that have persisted for far too long, and are not the main beneficiaries women and low earners?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is correct. The new state pension is much more generous for the many women who were historically worse off under the old system. More than 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year by 2030 as a result of these changes.

Employment and Disabled People

4. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What progress has been made on increasing the employment rate for disabled people.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): The employment rate among disabled people has increased to 49%, and the Government are committed to getting 1 million more disabled people into work over the next 10 years.

Kate Green: In 2015, the Minister said the Government’s aim was to halve the disability employment gap by 2020, and in 2016 the Social Market Foundation said that that meant an extra 1.2 million disabled people in employment, but now the Minister tells us that the ambition is for an extra 1 million disabled people in work within 10 years. Why are Ministers becoming less ambitious for disability employment?

Penny Mordaunt: When Labour was in office, it did very well in closing the disability employment gap—by raising the unemployment level among the general population. We will take a different approach. As I have said in this place before, we will look in great detail at the local numbers—for example, the numbers of people with a learning disability coming out of education; that is what we need to get people focused on.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the latest employment figures, particularly the youth employment figures. We are within touching distance of record youth unemployment. On young disabled people, will the Minister comment on Leonard Cheshire Disability and the great work it does, particularly its Can Do scheme? I think she recently met ambassadors of that scheme.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to pay tribute to Leonard Cheshire. It has launched a number of interesting and effective initiatives, which are very much part of our Work and Health programme.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): A constituent suffering from mental health problems who came to my surgery at the weekend has been denied support. Would the Minister like to come along so that we can encourage more employers to take on people with disabilities, and I am grateful to the jobcentre for its support. Would the Minister like to come along so that she can, in person, encourage employees in my constituency to take on more disabled people?

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am organising a Disability Confident event in my constituency to try to encourage more employers to take on people with disabilities, and I am grateful to the jobcentre for its support. Would the Minister like to come along so that she can, in person, encourage employees in my constituency to take on more disabled people?
Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend and other Members on both sides of the House who have run Disability Confident events and signed up employers. Our 5,000th employer has just been signed up. If I cannot attend my hon. Friend’s event, I shall be happy to send a video instead.

Mr Speaker: But I am sure that it is a personal ambition of the hon. Lady to go to her hon. Friend’s constituency. We look forward to getting an update in due course.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I address my question to the Minister who speaks for a party that has been in power for more than seven years? This morning my constituent, Debbie A, came to tell me that she had failed her ESA assessment, first because she had been told that she could hear her name being called from the waiting room, when in fact she had been told that it was being called by her son, who was sitting next to her; and, secondly, because the report had said that she had been hit by a bus, when in fact she had been hit on a bus. Does not the Minister accept that there are profound systemic problems in the assessment process?

Penny Mordaunt: There are things that we can do to improve the assessment process dramatically and also, more critically, to prevent people from having to go through those assessments. The thrust of the health and work consultation paper that we issued this year is to bring about early intervention in healthcare and to use healthcare information to populate the welfare system, and that is what we are trying to do.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to use technology to help their equality agenda, specifically in respect of disabilities?

Penny Mordaunt: We have just launched a platform called OpenLab, which brings together those working in technology and disability, and focuses primarily on accessibility issues. It will enable us to publicise problems that we are trying to solve, but will also enable that community to work together to arrive at solutions faster.

Universal Credit

6. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): How many new claims for universal credit have been paid on time since its introduction.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): Payment in arrears has been in the design of universal credit since 2010, and was implemented by the coalition Government in 2014. Our latest data show that more than 80% of new claimants are being paid in full and on time, which is a significant improvement on the position earlier this year, and that more than 90% receive some payment before the end of their first assessment period.

Kevin Foster: Universal credit is due to be rolled out in Torbay in May 2018. What further assurances can the Secretary of State give that resources will be made available to ensure that people in my constituency who make claims under the scheme will receive their payments on time?

Mr Gauke: We are ensuring that sufficient resources are available in jobcentres. It is worth pointing out that we have made significant progress on universal credit timeliness this year—as I have mentioned, more than 80% of new claimants received their full payment on time, and more than 90% received part of their payment—and we expect to build on that positive trend. I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming universal credit roll-out to Torbay next May.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The problem is that “on time” means after a six-week delay, and that delay, as the Secretary of State knows well, is causing immense hardship up and down the country. Last week I met Maria Amos, who came within an inch of suicide because she had to live literally on nothing but water for six weeks, irreparably damaging her health. The Secretary of State can choose to ignore organisations such as Citizens Advice, but will he at least take some notice when Sir John Major calls for a pause?

Mr Gauke: What I would say—is this exactly the point I made earlier—is that I do not believe that anybody should be left without any support for six weeks when they do not have savings or an alternative source of income, which is why it is important that advances are available within the system. The majority of claimants now make use of advances. We need to ensure that that is properly communicated to claimants. I will certainly do that, as I am sure will all Members of this House.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): My constituency was one of the first to introduce universal credit, and it went on to full service in 2016. Staff in my constituency tell me that they are very familiar with the new system. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to ensure that what we have learnt from the pathfinder jobcentres is quickly rolled out to those now taking up the new system?

Mr Gauke: We must constantly learn from experience—this is about testing, learning and improving. We must ensure that awareness of the advances system is high, and clearly that has increased in recent months. My hon. Friend makes a point about jobcentre staff, and clearly that has increased in recent months. My hon. Friend makes a point about jobcentre staff, and my experience of meeting such people up and down the country is that they are enthused by what universal credit can do for claimants to help them to get into work.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Twenty-four per cent. of new universal credit claimants wait longer than six weeks to be paid in full. Only one advance payment is allowed for a new universal credit claim, and the maximum award is 50% of the claimant’s estimated benefit, so how will advance payments really prevent families from getting into debt while waiting for their first universal credit payment?

Mr Gauke: The timeliness of payments has improved since the figures that the hon. Lady cites were compiled, and we continue to improve it. As I have said, 90% of claimants receive some support within the six-week period.
Advances are an important part of the system to ensure that people get the support they need. It is incumbent on all of us not to worry people that they will be left without any support whatsoever, but to draw their attention to the fact that they can access funds when they need to—generally waiting no more than five working days or, if necessary, receiving them straight away.

Margaret Greenwood: According to the Trussell Trust, food bank referrals have increased at more than double the national average in areas where the universal credit full service has been rolled out. Does the Secretary of State agree that the social security system should prevent people from having to visit food banks, rather than exacerbating need?

Mr Gauke: We are very keen to ensure that the advances system means that people can access funds so that they do not have to visit food banks. In recent months we have seen an increased use of that system, because we have done more to publicise it, and I want to go further on that. I think that is an important part of a system that, when we step back and look at it, is ensuring that more people are able to work and to progress in work, and that should not be forgotten.

Personal Independence Payments

8. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and efficiently. [901040]

16. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and efficiently. [901050]

18. Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and efficiently. [901053]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): We are committed to ensuring that people receive high-quality, fair and accurate assessments. The Department robustly monitors providers’ performance and independently audits assessments. Both providers are now increasing clinical support across their centres and providing more personalised coaching for their healthcare professionals.

Neil Coyle: The Department seems to conclude that everything is hunky-dory with PIP assessments, just as it did—erroneously—with work capability assessments. The Disability News Service says it has more than 200 cases of inaccurate PIP assessments, and I have come across plenty in Southwark, including that of my constituent, Tařik Ali. Tařik was assessed as having no evidence of hearing loss, despite being deaf in one ear. He was awarded no points for needing support to manage medication, despite the fact that he sees a GP every three weeks and that his carer manages his medication on a daily basis. There was no mention of Behçet’s syndrome in his assessment, despite its having been included in five hospital reports, his GP records and his medication prescription. When will the Minister stop cutting vital help to genuinely disabled people, stop wasting taxpayers’ money on inaccurate assessments and fake mandatory reconsidertions, and finally end the glaring inaccuracies in PIP assessments?

Penny Mordaunt: Currently, 3% of caseload is overturned on appeal, and in the last quarter the number of cases having to go to appeal dropped by 22%. We have introduced changes to get evidence in earlier and to improve the quality of assessments, but we will respond to all the things that Paul Gray has set out in his review this autumn.

Paula Sherriff: Two thirds of disabled people are successful at tribunal when they appeal PIP decisions. Given that the system is so clearly flawed, will the Minister commit to a full overhaul of the assessment process?

Penny Mordaunt: We have opportunities to reduce the burden on individuals going through assessments through what we are trying to do with the work capability assessment and by enabling information used in health care and in ESA assessments to reduce the burden on people getting PIP assessments—and, hopefully, doing away with the volume of assessments that people have. However, I say to the hon. Lady that currently 3% of cases are overturned on appeal. We are doing our best to ensure that the right decision is made earlier, and that seems to be bearing fruit in the numbers of people going to appeal.

Dr Paul Williams: In my experience as a GP, the impact of the conditions of people with anxiety and even agoraphobia is often not adequately assessed within PIP. I welcome the introduction of mental health nurses to the process, but how will the culture of the assessment be changed so that people’s physical and mental health capabilities are assessed holistically?

Penny Mordaunt: One of the changes that we have recently made with both providers is that before they turn to the healthcare evidence and the other things that have traditionally formed part of the assessment, they talk with the individual about the impact of the condition on their day-to-day life. That, I think, has improved the assessment dramatically.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): PIP is causing misery for thousands of disabled people. Two disabled people who were in my surgery this Saturday are threatened with destitution because the money that they got as part of their lifetime award this Saturday are threatened with destitution because the money that they got as part of their lifetime award under the disability living allowance was stopped following their PIP assessment. The conditions they have had since birth have not and will not change. Why will the Government not exempt people with lifelong or progressive conditions from ongoing PIP assessments, as they are doing with the work capability assessments?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is right that we have made that change in employment and support allowance. I give her one example: about 84% of people with motor neurone disease are on the highest rates for PIP, but 16% are not. It is therefore perfectly possible that someone will not be receiving the maximum amount of support but that as their condition progresses, they will...
need additional support. As I said earlier, we are trying to reduce the burden on individuals going through assessments, but some people will still need to have assessments for PIP because their need becomes greater.

Disabled People: Independent Living

10. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support disabled people to live independently. [901642]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Supporting someone to live independently is an essential part of enabling that person to pursue their goals, whether they are personal or career goals. Education and independent living support are the two highest priorities for the Office for Disability Issues.

Martyn Day: Every week around 800 Motability vehicles are taken away from disabled people across the UK as a result of the transition to PIP and, according to the most recent DWP statistic on reassessments, 48% of claimants receive a lower level or no award when transferring from DLA to PIP. Does the Minister really believe that taking money away from disabled people on low incomes will help them to live independently?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that in spring we announced changes to Motability to enable people to keep their cars pending appeal. We are looking to make changes to Motability, and I am pleased to say that many in this House have supported the campaign led by Together for Short Lives to extend the Motability scheme to under-threes. We have been in discussions with Motability and the Family Fund about extending Motability to under-threes. Individual constituents will not need to apply; they will be referred by the Family Fund. This is a big step forward in enabling families with small children who have heavy equipment to socialise and go out together.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My constituent Jacqui Woodcock has been campaigning for some time for Dying to Work. She has a terminal illness and was hounded out by her employer. She would like more employers to sign up—employers such as Derbyshire County Council and Rolls-Royce Aero Engines, which have just done so. Will the Minister say what steps she would like to see to ensure that people have more dignity when they have a terminal diagnosis?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for what she has done on the campaign and also Rolls-Royce and her local authority for signing up. I also thank her for bringing Jacqui Woodcock to the Department for Work and Pensions to meet me. I think that all Members owe Jacqui Woodcock a great debt of gratitude for the campaign that she has run in very trying and difficult circumstances. I have listened to her with great care, and we will take on board her recommendations as part of the health and work road map, which we will publish later this autumn.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The stress and exhaustion caused to my constituent by the removal of her Motability car led to her losing her professional post and being redeployed to a role on half the salary. Will the Minister look again at the ridiculous situation whereby the Government are prepared to spend more on Access to Work payments for taxis—in this case nearly £4,500—than on PIP mobility support, which would offer real independence to disabled workers?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady makes a very good point; indeed, we are looking at precisely that. There are lots of pots of money out there—PIP and Access to Work, which she mentioned, are just two—but very little reference between them. We have been working on that and we hope to make some announcements shortly.

Health and Work Programme

12. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What progress is being made on the Health and Work programme. [901044]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I am pleased to announce to the House that six contracts between the Department and the successful suppliers to the Health and Work Programme were signed on 29 September.

Alex Burghart: It is clear that the Health and Work programme presents an opportunity to bring a lot more disabled people into work. Will the Minister tell the House what requirements are being put on contract providers?

Penny Mordaunt: The key to the programme is that participants will receive much more personalised and tailored support. We need to provide bespoke things to individuals who have complex needs if we want them to be successful. We will be looking for providers to forge links with employers, nationally and locally, but also with health and social care and other local services.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Government have backtracked on their commitment to halve the disability employment gap, and the funding for the Work and Health programme will be as little as £130 million a year, which is a fraction of what was set aside for the Work programme. Given the recent report from the UN committee on the rights of persons with disabilities, which condemned the Government’s progress, can the Minister advise when they will finally publish their response to the “Work, health and disability” Green Paper? Will the Government respond to the UN’s concerns and include high-quality, impairment-specific support, which disabled people have been calling for?

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by welcoming the hon. Lady to her post?

Despite the weeks of the general election, we are still going to meet our original timetable to publish the health and work road map, which will set out in detail not just the Health and Work programme, which is only one small part of what we are planning, but a full comprehensive package to deliver personalised, tailored support for disabled people, support for employers, healthcare reforms and welfare reforms.
The Office for Disability Issues is looking at the UN report; we volunteered to put ourselves through this process, and there is more we can do to lever in some of the things in that report to help achieve some of our ambitions, particularly on accessibility.

**Universal Credit**

13. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): Whether he has plans to reduce the taper rate for universal credit claimants.

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We have already made the taper rate more generous by reducing it from 65% to 63% in April this year, which means that recipients can keep more of every pound they earn.

Stephen McPartland: A taper rate of 63p in the pound is, in effect, a tax rate of 63% on net income. Surely the Minister accepts that that is a punitive rate and a barrier to work.

**Damian Hinds:** This all has to be seen in the context of our reducing the benefit withdrawal rates and making it more attractive to go into work. Of course I understand the attraction of reducing the taper rate, which is why we have done it, but there is also always a trade-off with costs; reducing the rate from 65% to 63%, as we have done, carries a cost—an investment in the system of £1.8 billion.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the whole point of a pilot to test a system and then change it before it is rolled out further? Many of my constituents are in the universal credit pilot scheme. Given my caseload from them, I was horrified today to receive letters about all the rest of the jobcentres in my constituency getting universal credit roll-out. This needs to be looked at, along with the taper and many other issues, before it is rolled out further.

**Damian Hinds:** In days of yore, such big changes used to be done via a big Gantt chart on the wall and then one day things going live. That is not how universal credit has been designed or rolled out; it is a very gradual process and has been being rolled out since 2013. The full service is now in more than 100 jobcentres, and we continue to update, evolve and improve it at every turn.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who has a similar inquiry at Question 17, were standing, I would call him, but if he is not, I will not—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): rise—

Mr Speaker: He is now, so I will.

17. **Kevin Hollinrake**: Many of my constituents get paid weekly, and real cash-flow problems can be caused if they move from a weekly payment to a monthly payment cycle. Will the Minister set out what we are doing to help deal with these cash-flow problems? Will we keep these measures under review to make sure we provide a workable solution?

**Damian Hinds:** Although most people these days are paid monthly, quite a lot of people are still paid weekly. When people move into a new job, they could then be getting paid weekly or monthly. There are two important things to mention here: advances, which have been extensively discussed during today’s questions, and the personal budgeting supports we offer to people to help them deal with changes in their cash flow.

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): Universal credit claimants must wait a minimum of six weeks for their first payment, which does not reflect the world of work. Advance payments are not a remedy for that, because they are a loan, entrenching poverty and debt. Is the Department really going to ignore the unanimous plea from support and advice agencies to pause this roll-out?

**Damian Hinds:** It would be wrong to pause the roll-out, because that would mean fewer people would have the benefit of universal credit, more people would be stuck on 16-hour jobs and fewer people would be able to claim the higher rate of childcare reimbursement. Universal credit is working; we know that people are getting into work quicker and that, once they are there, they can see clearly that working more will always pay.

**Personal Independence Payments**

15. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If he will take steps to ensure that people applying for personal independence payments are seen by a specialist at their initial assessment.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Personal independence payment assessments require specialist skills, which is why they are undertaken by qualified health professionals, who are experts in disability analysis, and focus on the effects of health conditions and impairments on an individual’s daily life.

**Ruth Cadbury:** That is not the experience of some of my constituents, including one who has a rare condition and is on the highest level of DLA, and so should automatically be entitled to PIP, but whose assessor had no knowledge of the condition and refused the PIP application. Will the Minister specify the exact training, experience and competence requirements an applicant would have to demonstrate to qualify as a healthcare professional who could undertake PIP assessments for the DWP?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I have stated many times in the House the categories of healthcare professionals who can work as PIP assessors—it is a long list—but I should point out that these people are not carrying out health assessments. They are not there to diagnose; they are there to record the impact of someone’s condition on their personal life, which is quite different. As I have said in answer to previous questions, we will introduce some new measures on PIP as part of our response to Paul Gray’s second review.

Mr Speaker: We are well out of time, but we will take the last question because I do not want the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) to feel left out. Let us hear him.
Comparative Unemployment Rates

19. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent comparative assessment he has made of rates of unemployment in the UK and in other European countries. [901054]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The UK has the joint fourth lowest unemployment rate in the European Union. At 4.3%, UK unemployment is the lowest in 42 years. It is 3.3 percentage points below the EU 28 average and half that of the euro area.

Daniel Kawczynski: Our unemployment rates continue to fall faster than the EU mean. How is universal credit helping that?

Damian Hinds: Universal credit is an absolutely integral part of our overall approach to employment. It not only simplifies the system but makes it easier for people to go into work, because they do not have to think about whether subsequently they might have to restart their benefit claim. Once people are in work, it means that they can make progress more easily because there are none of the cliff edges of the old system.

Topical Questions

T2. [900946] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): We are delivering our promise to reform welfare provision in this country. Universal credit replaces the outdated and complex benefits system of the past, which too often stifled people’s potential. Universal credit is a flexible and personalised system that offers unprecedented support. It ensures that people are always better off in work, with payment gradually reducing as earnings increase. It is working: under universal credit, people are moving into work faster and staying in work for longer. We are fully committed to the scheduled roll-out for universal credit full service. It will be expanded throughout the country to the planned timescale, delivering a simpler system that encourages work and supports aspiration.

Tom Pursglove: Several of my constituents have raised with me the importance of ensuring that assessment centres are as accessible as possible. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that, on an ongoing basis, accessibility is checked regularly and improvements are made where necessary?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. DWP officials visit assessment centres to check them against accessibility standards. He flagged up concerns about the parking drop-off points at the Peterborough centre; following his raising of those concerns, improvements have been made.

T7. [900951] Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Data for my constituency, Lewisham West and Penge, show that the number of claimants aged 50 or older who are seeking work has increased by 15.5% in the past year. In closing Lewisham jobcentre and migrating to a more internet-based system, how exactly is the Department going to help those with limited access to computers or limited computer literacy, or indeed those who will have difficulties travelling to a jobcentre that is further away?

Mr Gauke: On jobcentres, the Department is sensibly making use of the fact that a contract has ended to make a number of improvements to the service provided. Yes, that does mean that some jobcentres will close, but it also means that the provision of services throughout the country will be done in a modernised and effective way. On employment, the fact is that more people are employed than ever before, including older members of the workforce.

T3. [900947] Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): In the light of the worrying figures, both nationally and for my constituency, will my hon. Friend the Minister outline the steps the Department is taking to reduce the level of personal independence payment reassessments, so that individuals in my constituency can access at the earliest opportunity the benefits that are due to them?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): We have implemented a wide range of initiatives across the whole claim process, including speeding up the process to clear more claims, increasing the number of healthcare professionals and extending working hours, and making improvements to IT systems.

T9. [900953] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Universal credit is to be introduced in my constituency on 14 December, which, in my view, is indecent. The introduction should be delayed, as it will be a catastrophe for many children at Christmas. As the Secretary of State believes the opposite, will he accept my offer now of a visit to my constituency the week after its introduction, in the run-up to Christmas, to see whether I am right or he is right and what the impact will be?

Mr Gauke: I visit jobcentres all the time and what I hear is that universal credit is providing a more personalised support that is helping to get more people into work and that it is an important reform. Those who stand in the way of it are failing to help the people who need support.

T4. [900948] Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I know Ministers take very seriously the responsibility of supporting those with mental ill health to stay in work. One of my constituents has contacted me about his concerns. He is suffering from mental health challenges and is finding that the constant threat of redundancy or reorganisation is taking a toll on his mental health. Can the Minister tell me now, or write to me, to explain what obligations employers have to take into account their employees’ mental health when they are making such decisions?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the experience of my right hon. Friend’s constituent. As she will know, the Prime Minister commissioned a review of mental health in the workplace led by Paul Farmer and Dennis Stevenson. Their findings will be reported to this House shortly.
Universal credit was rolled out in 29 jobcentres in July. It is important that we continue to make progress in the roll-out.

Mr Gauke: The benefits freeze was a measure that this Government took to contribute to reducing the deficit. On the point about people having to wait 10 weeks before receiving universal credit, 80% get paid in full and on time after six weeks. The system of arrears is inherent in universal credit because the payment is based on how much a person has earned over the previous month. That has always been part of the design, and it was part of the design that, presumably, the hon. Gentleman voted for when the coalition Government passed the legislation.

Damian Hinds: The higher rate of tax is 45% on gross income and the effective rate of tax on universal credit claimants is 63%. How can the Minister justify that?

Damian Hinds: We had an estate that was underutilised. As the Secretary of State said, coming to the end of the large contract that covered very much of the estate, there was an opportunity—indeed, a requirement—to review all our needs to ensure that we had the best possible estate for the future. We had clear criteria for determining which of those sites should be open to public consultation. Where those criteria were met, of course there was a consultation.

Mr Gauke: The benefits freeze was a measure that this Government took to contribute to reducing the deficit. On the point about people having to wait 10 weeks before receiving universal credit, 80% get paid in full and on time after six weeks. The system of arrears is inherent in universal credit because the payment is based on how much a person has earned over the previous month. That has always been part of the design, and it was part of the design that, presumably, the hon. Gentleman voted for when the coalition Government passed the legislation.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Secretary of State has already made it clear that, when the jobcentre closes in Shipley, outreach work will still be carried out by the jobcentre in the constituency. Can he confirm what he has in mind, when the specific proposals will be announced and what consultation will be carried out in the local community to ensure that they meet the needs of my constituents?

Mr Gauke: Universal credit was rolled out in 29 jobcentres in July. It is important that we continue to make progress in the roll-out. We are doing it gradually and sensibly, but we are moving towards a system that helps more people get into work. Of course we are constantly learning lessons and finding ways to improve things, but it is a system that is helping to deliver more people into work.

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Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State and everyone in this House would agree that parents should fulfil their financial obligations to their children. But do they agree that much more should be done to combat those who are shamefully using legal loopholes to avoid paying child maintenance?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage): Where a parent fails and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage): Where someone’s personal income appears suspicious action to recover that debt and to re-establish compliance. Where someone’s personal income appears suspicious in any way, caseworkers may refer that case to our newly befeefed-up financial investigations unit.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I wrote to the Secretary of State on Friday about my constituent, Danielle Brown, who lost her leg at the age of two. She has now lost herPIP and her Motability car. Will the Minister look into this case and assure me that I will get a reply as soon as possible?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to look at the hon. Lady’s case. We changed the rules on Motability to ensure that people could go to appeal and not lose their car in the meantime. It sounds as if something has gone wrong in this particular case. I cannot make a decision, but I can look at the case and see what we can do to help.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am grateful to the Government for the assistance given to my constituent, who had to leave Dominica because of the terrible damage caused by the hurricane. But on her return back to this country with her 22-month-old son, she has discovered that she is not entitled to any benefits whatever for three months. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can ensure that we have a right and proper system to make sure that people in such circumstances really are entitled to benefits?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that point. We will certainly look at it and ensure that she has the opportunity to meet us to discuss it.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): East Lothian is a pilot area for universal credit, and the third sector—particularly the citizens advice bureau and East Lothian’s local authority welfare service—has kept universal credit going by supporting a very high percentage of applicants. Will the Minister confirm when there will be additional funding for the third sector, so that it can carry on supporting the DWP with universal credit?

Mr Gauke: We obviously continue to engage with the voluntary sector. I know what the CAB was campaigning for, but it did welcome what I said last week about advances; indeed, I am meeting the CAB later this week to further discuss how we can work together to deliver a very important welfare reform.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): While the increase in advance payments is welcome, does the Secretary of State not share my concern that the CAB has said that, on average, claimants have only less than £4 a month to pay back creditors? Therefore, advance payments are simply storing up problems for the future. Will he commit to giving the House a statement on the numbers who are coming into universal credit, the time it takes to pay them and the numbers who are forced into debt, rent arrears or hardship because of this policy?

Mr Gauke: We do update the House on information, as we have it, about the number of claimants for universal credit, the timeliness details and other details, and we will continue to do that. When it comes to advances, there is a concern across the House that people are left six weeks without receiving any support. Ensuring that advances are there and that they are made known to people is really important, and I hope all Members will do that.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): A constituent who relies on agency work from the shipyards finds himself in rent arrears of over £900 as a result of being on universal credit. Does that not show that the concerns of social housing providers should be listened to, or does a social housing provider have to go under before its concerns are addressed?

Mr Gauke: The DWP has been working closely with social housing providers on putting in place what is described as the landlord portal, which enables information to flow between social landlords and the DWP. It has already been piloted and will be in operation later this month. That is one of the things we are doing to ensure that this process is constantly improving and that we can verify identity and get the right money to the right people as quickly as possible.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): How much does the Secretary of State estimate is being paid out through housing benefit, or will be paid out under the housing-related costs of universal credit, for unfit accommodation in the private rented sector? All too often, I meet vulnerable tenants living in completely unfit accommodation. A huge amount of taxpayers’ money is being used to line the pockets of dodgy landlords. It is a complete and utter disgrace, and I would like to know what the Secretary of State’s estimate is of the size of the problem and what he is going to do about it.

Caroline Dinenage: We are always concerned about substandard rental accommodation, and we do keep in touch with the relevant bodies. This is something that is generally of concern to the Department, and it is something we will keep an eye on moving forward.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The all-party parliamentary group on deafness recently heard compelling evidence about the disproportionate and damaging impact the cap on awards under the Access to Work scheme is having on people who use British sign language as their first language, with deaf people having job offers withdrawn, withdrawing from their roles and giving up on their careers. The Government say they are committed to improving disabled people’s opportunities at work, but this policy is destroying them. Will the Minister think again?

Penny Mordaunt: We have looked in great detail at many aspects of Access to Work, and although it is a popular scheme, there are many things we want to change in it. I very much recognise that the scheme is
not just about giving someone a piece of technology to enable them to communicate; it is about giving them the services they need to be their best—to thrive and to be their most creative in the workplace. For some, that will involve British sign language interpreters. This is very much an area we are looking at, and it will be something we bring forward and report back on in the health and work road map.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Are levels of child poverty falling or rising?

Damian Hinds: When one compares rates of poverty with those before the change of Government in 2010, we see that none of the four main measures has worsened and, in fact, three have improved.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): As of November 2016, youth unemployment in my constituency of Wolverhampton South West was 27%. Now, we are due to have the roll-out in December and this will see the enforcement of the youth obligation. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that young people who reside in constituencies such as mine are provided with support into employment, while the transition to the full UC service is implemented?

Damian Hinds: I had the pleasure of visiting Wolverhampton just last week and had the opportunity to speak to my colleagues in jobcentres in the area about youth unemployment. Of course, the figure for young people who have left full-time education and are unemployed has dropped below 5% for the first time since that data series began. As we know about the scarring effect of any period out of work for a young person, we continue to work hard through things such as work experience and sector-based work academies, and that is showing great success.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have run out of time, but I shall call one further questioner, a Member with an insatiable appetite for these matters and a detailed, some would say anorakish, knowledge of all the most complex formulae. I am referring, of course, to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. Apart from shocking delays, Citizens Advice highlights two big problems with universal credit. One is that it is too complicated; people cannot understand it. The second is that when there is a problem, there is nobody there to help people. I am glad that the Secretary of State is meeting Citizens Advice, but will he have anything to say to them on those two specific problems?

Mr Gauke: The personalised support available in jobcentres to people claiming universal credit is much more advanced than that which we have had in the past. In terms of complexity, universal credit is a much simpler system than that which has existed up to now, with six different benefits, leaving us in the absurd position in which people were unwilling to take a job that required them to work more than 16 hours because they would move from one benefit system to another, knowing that their hours might fall in the future, so they would move back to a different system. That complexity has discouraged people from working more hours and we should all seek to tackle that. That is exactly what universal credit does.
Monarch Airlines

3.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the steps the Government have been taking to support those affected by the collapse of Monarch Airlines, in particular the 110,000 passengers left abroad without a flight back to the UK and the almost 2,000 people who have lost their jobs.

This situation is highly regrettable and all parties considered options to avoid the collapse of the company. Ultimately, however, Monarch’s board took the decision to place it into administration and it ceased trading at around 4 am on Monday 2 October. The engineering arm of the group remains a viable business and continues to trade. Ahead of the collapse, my Department had been working closely with the Civil Aviation Authority and several Departments across Whitehall to prepare contingency plans, and the response since last week has been swift and substantial.

To put the situation into context, this operation is the largest of its kind ever undertaken. The CAA has essentially set up one of the UK’s largest airlines to conduct it. Let me give Members a sense of the scale. We have put arrangements in place to bring back 110,000 people to the UK, with 700 flights over a two-week period. We have had a maximum of 35 aircraft in operation at any one time. The CAA is working to secure planes from 27 different airlines. More than 200 CAA staff are working on the project with thousands more in partner organisations taking part. There are 40 airports involved in the UK, around the Mediterranean and beyond. That has required 267 coaches carrying more than 13,000 passengers, and so far there have been more than 39,000 calls to our customer service centres, all swiftly answered by more than 250 call centre staff. There have been more than 1 million unique visitors to a dedicated website—monarch.caa.co.uk—and 7 million page views. Furthermore, more than 1 million people have been reached through our Facebook promotion. Ten Government Departments and agencies have been involved, including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London and our extensive diplomatic and consular network in the affected countries.

I have seen at first hand the work being done across Government and the CAA to make this operation a success. I have spoken to some of the passengers who have returned to the UK on Government flights. I have been hugely impressed by what I have seen, and we have had a very strong, supportive response from the passengers affected, many of whom deservedly praised the CAA and all the Departments involved in this enormous operation.

Normally, the CAA’s responsibility for bringing passengers back would extend only to customers whose trips are covered by the air travel organisers’ licence scheme, but this is the largest airline failure in UK history and there would have been insufficient capacity in the commercial aviation market to enable passengers to get home on other airlines. The danger was that tens of thousands of passengers abroad would have no easy means of returning to the UK. That is why I instructed the CAA to ensure that all those abroad were offered an alternative flight home. As of last night, around 80,000 passengers had returned to the UK; that is almost three quarters of the total number who were abroad at the time of the collapse. We have had teams of Government officials at overseas airports providing advice and assistance to passengers.

Despite those robust plans and the smoothness of the operation so far, the situation is hugely distressing for all concerned. Obviously, it has been a priority to get people back to the UK, and our hearts go out to those who have lost bookings as a result of the collapse, but in addition to supporting passengers we have been focused on working to ensure that the almost 2,000 former Monarch employees receive the support they need. I am pleased to report that airlines have already directly appealed to those former employees. For example, Virgin Atlantic is offering a fast-track recruitment process for cabin crew and pilots, and easyJet has invited applications for 500 cabin crew vacancies. I and members of my team spoke to the airlines when it became clear what was happening to try to secure their help in getting those opportunities for staff, and I am pleased to see that coming to fruition. easyJet is also calling for direct-entry captains or first officers who meet captain qualifications.

All former Monarch employees will have received information from Jobcentre Plus outlining the support available to them. In total, Jobcentre Plus has pulled together a list of more than 6,300 vacancies across the major UK-based airlines—that is more than three times the number of people being made redundant—which I hope will help those former employees to remain in the airline business. The Minister with responsibility for aviation has been in contact with Members whose constituencies have been hardest hit by these job losses. They have our assurance that we will work with them and the industry to offer what support we can.

I am also aware of the Government’s duty to the taxpayer. Although affected passengers have been told they will not have to pay to be flown back to the UK, we have entered into discussions with several third parties with the aim of recovering the costs of the operation. The ATOL scheme of course provides financial cover for those with ATOL protection. We are currently engaged in constructive discussions with the relevant credit and debit card providers so that we can recoup from them some of the cost to taxpayers of the repatriation flights. We are having similar discussions with other travel providers through which passengers may have booked a Monarch holiday, and I thank all those with whom we have held discussions for their constructive and realistic approach.

The initial response to this unprecedented situation would not have been so successful without the support and co-operation of many players. I am sure we would all say that the loss of a major British brand that was close to celebrating its half-century is a really sad moment. However, it should not be seen as a reflection on the general health of the UK aviation sector, which continues to thrive. We have never had the collapse of an airline or holiday company on this scale before, and we have responded swiftly and decisively.

Of course, right now our efforts are rightly focused on getting employees into new jobs and getting passengers home. All our efforts will turn to working through any reforms necessary to ensure that passengers do not find themselves in this position again. We need to look at all the options—not just ATOL, but whether it is
possible to enable airlines to wind down in an orderly manner and look after their customers themselves, without the need for the Government to step in. We will be putting a lot of effort into that in the months ahead. Our prime task has been to get people home, and I am immensely grateful to all who have taken part in what has proved, so far, to be a smooth and successful operation.

3.49 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Britain’s fifth largest airline, Monarch, collapsed because of a litany of failures by the Government, the regulator and the company’s financial backers and advisers. Its demise must also be seen in the context of a ferociously competitive aviation sector, which is adjusting to major overcapacity problems and the loss of services because of terrorism. A further backdrop to the industry is the foggy skies of Brexit, and the total lack of certainty from this Government for the British aviation industry after March 2019.

The airline’s bankruptcy has left huge losses on the shoulders of the public, rather than of the parent company or the regulator. It is the staff, customers, the taxpayer and pensioners who will pay the price. Creditor bills include the £60 million paid by the Government to repatriate holidaymakers, not forgetting the £26 million paid last year when Monarch previously came close to collapse; the £7.5 million to the Pension Protection Fund; the 45 days’ pay owed to the 2,000 staff who were made redundant; and the ticket refunds for the 750,000 outstanding bookings at the time of the collapse.

Why did the Government not do more to support Monarch and ensure that the company was viable, if only for the short term? The German Government recently stepped in to assist Air Berlin and the Italian Government have supported Alitalia. At the very least, an orderly wind-down of the airline would have been preferable to sudden administration.

Monarch is reported to have had £50 million in the bank. Why was the airline not granted a short-term ATOL licence extension, which would have allowed it to continue trading and at least bring its passengers back? Who decided not to grant Monarch an ATOL licence extension? More time would have allowed Monarch to be sold in parts. For example, Monarch’s landing slots are reported to be worth £60 million. Such assets could have been realised in an orderly wind-down. Instead, moneys from the sale of these assets will go to the secured creditor and former owner Greybull Capital, while the public purse gets nothing.

The statutory role of the CAA is to provide choice and value for money for passengers. British consumers now have one less airline to choose from. On its watch, there has been a surge in the cost of UK air fares following Ryanair’s cancellation of flights last month. Monarch’s demise will only push up flight costs further. There is an estimated £200 million in the CAA-administered ATOL compensation fund, yet it only covers about one in 20 of Monarch’s customers. Why is the public purse paying while the outdated ATOL pot sits largely untouched? Monarch Airlines continued to sell flights until Sunday 1 October, even though the airline knew it was going into administration the following day. Why did the CAA not act to stop that?

Greybull Capital’s takeover of Monarch in 2014 was the beginning of the end for the airline. Greybull is a private investment firm that has already presided over the collapse of My Local convenience stores and Comet, among others. Serious questions must now be asked about the conduct of firms such as Greybull, the way they invest and their wider stewardship.

A report in yesterday’s edition of The Sunday Times suggested that the £165 million rescue package for Monarch last year was largely funded by Boeing, as part of a cut-price deal for an order of 737 aircraft. What is the Secretary of State’s assessment of the role of Boeing in the financial engineering of Monarch? The Prime Minister recently criticised the conduct of Boeing against Bombardier in Belfast, in support of her Democratic Unionist party allies. Why is there no criticism of Boeing’s role in the loss of 2,000 jobs in Luton?

The role of KPMG must also be called into question. The firm was appointed to seek buyers for Monarch’s short-haul business prior to its collapse. It was actively doing so. Why is the same firm now acting as Monarch’s administrator? Does the Secretary of State agree with me that that is a glaring conflict of interest?

Finally, the way in which Monarch met its demise should set alarm bells ringing, so will the Secretary of State confirm that there will be a full investigation into the concerns that have been raised?

Chris Grayling: I am sorry the hon. Gentleman did not have a good word to say for all the efforts put in place to bring people back. I would just remind him that, interestingly, in 2008—the last time we had an aviation failure in this country, Excel Airways—the Labour Government followed a very similar path to the one we have followed, with taxpayer-funded repatriation. They did the right thing then, and we are doing the right thing now. I am simply sorry that Labour Members have forgotten that they did the right thing in government, and cannot now say that our doing the right thing this time is indeed the right thing to do. [Interruption.] They did the right thing then, and we are doing the right thing now, and I am just sorry that he could not say a good word about those involved.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the reasons for the collapse. First, this is not an issue about Brexit. The airline had been struggling for three years, and the first concerns were raised about it long before the referendum was even held. I had hoped that this summer, after the rescue package last year, the airline would see its way through. As its chief executive said, it has been a victim of the anxieties about tourism in the east Mediterranean for security reasons. Those have led to a concentration of business in the west Mediterranean and the traditional resorts of Spain and Portugal and a price war from which the company was ill equipped to recover. That is what has happened, no more no less.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the licence, and there was no issue about its renewal. What happened was never about the renewal of the licence—the business had simply reached the end of the road. Its board came to the conclusion that it could not carry on.
The hon. Gentleman said why the company carried on selling tickets the day before. The reality is that any airline that runs into difficulties will carry on selling tickets until it can no longer do so. The moment it stops doing so, it collapses, and that is what happened. It would happen any time an airline ran into such difficulties. There is no other way to do it. The moment it stops selling tickets, it stops doing business, and that is precisely what happened.

The hon. Gentleman talked about competition, and other airlines are already stepping into the breach. Jet2, one of our fast-growing, emerging airlines, has already said that it will step in and run some of the routes. That is what a market does. If one business fails, others step in. The tragedy of the Labour party in the last few years is that it has moved away from understanding markets to being utterly hostile to markets and the private sector.

We have a thriving aviation sector with competition between airlines delivering a good deal for consumers, and occasionally—one under a Labour Government and once under ours—something has gone wrong. In both of those situations, the Government of the day stepped in to try to make sure that we looked after the travelling public. I have no doubt that if it ever happens again, someone will do the same.

We do have to learn the lessons. We have to understand whether we can make sensible changes to the laws to ensure that this does not happen again. We are already legislating to extend the ATOL scheme to provide better protection for people who book over the internet in a different way from how they have in the past. I am clear that the job of the Government is to look after the travelling public and step in when things go wrong. We have done that, and we are seeking to get back as much money as possible, as Labour did in 2008. Above all, our job is to do our best for the travelling public and the employees. That is what we are doing. I am proud of what we are doing, and I am just disappointed that the Opposition cannot even say well done to the people who have worked so hard in support.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The chief executive of Monarch has attributed the principal reason for the demise of the airline to terrorism and the resulting flight bans to both Tunisia and Sharm El Sheikh. Can the Secretary of State give his assessment of the merits of that argument?

Chris Grayling: There is no doubt that that was a significant factor, and not only because of changes in consumer patterns. Many other airlines chose to concentrate their resources this summer in the traditional resorts of Spain and Portugal. Alicante airport and others were full of planes this summer, and Monarch got squeezed out in a price war for which it was not financially strong enough. Ironically, it carried more passengers than two years ago, but with far lower revenues, and that more than anything else is what has caused its demise. It is a consequence of the security situation and of people taking a cautious approach to their holidays.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The sad fate of Monarch Airlines is a stark example of the realities of Brexit beginning to bite. There is no denying that the fall in the pound has led to significant increases in the operating costs for the airline over the past year. The weak pound has also affected consumers and led to a drop in bookings. Add to that the uncertainties over the future of British carriers in Europe that served as a significant deterrent for any potential buyer who might otherwise have been found, and Monarch’s fate was sealed. Does the Secretary of State agree that as long as uncertainties over Brexit continue there is a danger of similar high-profile collapses?

Can the Secretary of State say with certainty today that the rights of UK passengers will not be eroded or diluted after Brexit? Will he confirm that the Government will work with administrators and the unions to ensure that employee rights are fully respected during the process, and that—where applicable—compensation is made available in a timely manner, in view of the fact that the manner of the administration raises real concerns about employee rights?

Chris Grayling: I am really sorry the hon. Lady has taken that approach. Let me be absolutely clear: this airline did not fail because of Brexit; this airline failed because it had a business model that was not capable of dealing with a price war in the Mediterranean. That is the reality of the situation and that is what its chief executive said. The hon. Lady talks about Brexit causing a lack of investment, but in the past few weeks we have seen a big expansion. Jet2 has set up a new base at Stansted and there has been a huge investment in the UK by Norwegian, which is becoming a real player in the low-cost marketplace. The market is changing and Monarch, a business that has been around for 50 years, was not able to adapt to those changes. I am afraid she is just doing a disservice to the economy of the United Kingdom when she claims that this was a consequence of Brexit. She talks about employees. The biggest favour we can do for the employees of Monarch is to work to ensure they get another job quickly, and that is what we are seeking to do.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Following on from the many letters I have received from constituents, will the Secretary of State join me in thanking and congratulating the staff of the CAA, the Department for Transport and my local airport, Manchester airport, on the work they have done on the biggest evacuation in peacetime?

Chris Grayling: I am very happy to do that. I pay tribute to the staff of Manchester airport—I met the first plane back at Manchester airport—who rowed in behind the challenge. They were notified only late on the previous day, but by Monday morning staff were out greeting passengers, telling them what had happened and sorting out all the issues arising from the administration. I owe a big debt of gratitude to the staff of Manchester airport, Gatwick airport, Birmingham airport, Luton airport and Leeds Bradford airport, all of whom rose to the occasion, and to all the other people and organisations involved in the exercise.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In 2014, the CAA recognised the fragility of Monarch’s finances and insisted on ATOL protection of flight-only bookings, whereas that requirement was dropped in December 2016. Monarch’s administrators cite cost pressures and increasingly competitive market conditions as contributors to its collapse. Given that the fall in the value of the pound and the loss of tourism in Egypt and Tunisia...
Lilian Greenwood (Luton North) (Lab): As the MP for Luton North, I represent many of those who have lost their jobs, and I have to say that, had the company been in public ownership—with proper transparency and accountability to Parliament—I suspect that this would not have happened. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Kelvin Hopkins: My concern is that, when the company collapsed, the assets had almost all disappeared, so there was very little financial value in the assets of the company. Was this to benefit shareholders and owners, and how much money has the state effectively paid out that the owners and shareholders should have been accountable for?

Chris Grayling: The ATOL scheme counts as public expenditure whatever happens. The impact on public finances, whether or not this was covered entirely by the ATOL scheme, remains the same because of how Government accounting works. I take advice from the CAA on the steps we need to take. Last year, Monarch had a big injection of cash, and in the first part of this year it looked like things were back on the straight and narrow. What changed this summer was the price war, which undermined the company’s revenues and led to a position where its losses were mounting week by week. That was the real issue. I have no doubt that the hon. Lady and her Committee will want to deal with these matters in greater detail, and I look forward to talking to her. She has every right to scrutinise what we have done. We sought to do our best for the travelling public and to take the decisions we were advised to take at the right time.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): As a former Business Minister before the EU referendum, and apparently as one of the chief “remoaners”, may I make it absolutely clear that the unfortunate demise of Monarch has absolutely nothing to do with Brexit? Those who seek to make it an issue based on Brexit do not do anybody any favours. I commend the Secretary of State not only for his statement but for his hard work and that of his Ministers in doing their utmost to bring everybody back to this country. Will he confirm that Transport Ministers and Business Ministers have been doing their absolute best for Monarch for years? Will he continue to work with Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers to look at how we can open up airports, such as Sharm El Sheikh and those in Tunisia, to support the rest of our aviation industry?

Chris Grayling: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for her words. She is absolutely right. This is a sad tale of an airline that has been struggling for years. A lot of effort has been put in by many people to try to keep it afloat. It is a real disappointment that they were not able to succeed. She is absolutely right about the Brexit issue. If we want another example, it is only a few weeks since Air France and KLM spent hundreds of millions of pounds on a stake in Virgin Atlantic. Those are not the actions of commercial organisations that believe that Brexit is destroying the British aviation sector. Those who suggest it are simply talking down the country and that is not acceptable. I am therefore very grateful to her for what she says. She is absolutely right. I give her an assurance that the Government will do everything we can to support the sector, to support the people who lost out as a result of Monarch’s collapse, and to continue to ensure we have a strong sector for the future.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): As the MP for Luton North, I represent many of those who have lost their jobs, and I have to say that, had the company been
Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman should remember that the pension scheme was transferred to the Pension Protection Fund in 2014, when it was sold by the Swiss family that had owned the business since the 1960s, so it is not straightforward to talk about pension rights now. He should not second guess any details of how, why or where the financing package was secured a year ago. It is a matter of record that it involved rescheduling or reorganising the leasing of the aircraft, but had it been able to secure the future of the airline, as we all hoped at the time, we would all be grateful it had happened. It is tragic that that was not the case.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Almost 500 Monarch staff are based at Manchester airport, and many are my constituents, so I am grateful to hear the assurances that the Government will work with the industry to support staff back into work. Will the Secretary of State outline what more support will be given to our regional jobcentres to assist my constituents who have lost their Monarch jobs?

Chris Grayling: Before it became clear that the collapse was happening, we had pre-meetings across Whitehall between the Departments that needed to be involved, including the Department for Work and Pensions, and Jobcentre Plus has been working with all those affected. That work will continue where necessary. I am glad that if such terribly difficult circumstances had to arise, they arose in a thriving sector with lots of job opportunities. The fact that Jobcentre Plus was able quickly to identify more than 6,000 vacancies for 1,700 people looking for jobs is a good step in the right direction and a tribute to the success of that sector, off the back of what has been a successful economy in recent years.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Four hundred employees, including skilled engineering workers, are set to lose their jobs at Birmingham airport. The region can ill afford to lose those skills and the contribution they make to the regional economy. Will the Secretary of State ensure that his Department redoubles its efforts, and does everything possible to ensure that those people can find equally skilled work elsewhere in the region as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. Securing strong futures for those people has been, is, and will remain a priority for us, along with getting the passengers back. As I have said, however, I am encouraged by the number of other airlines that are actively seeking to recruit. As slots become vacant at Birmingham, Luton, Gatwick, Leeds and Manchester, other airlines are already seeking to move in and take those slots, and they will need staff to work on the business as they arrive.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give further details of what the Government are doing to assist former employees of Monarch Airlines who have lost their jobs as a result of the airline’s collapse?

Chris Grayling: We have had a very early promise on a lot of things. A few hours before the administration came into effect, I spoke to the chief executive of easyJet, who was very helpful. I should express thanks to easyJet for helping us with some problematic routes; for instance, only specialised pilots can fly into or out of Funchal airport.

The chief executive gave me an assurance, and easyJet has given us assurances subsequently, that the airline will hire a substantial proportion of those staff. It is likely to hire 500 very quickly to meet its future demands, because its business is growing rapidly, and I know that other airlines plan to step in and do the same. Jobcentre Plus has already been holding job fairs and airlines have already been going through recruitment exercises, so it is my hope that all those affected will find jobs quickly.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Secretary of State emphasised that Monarch passengers abroad would be covered until 15 October, but constituents of mine who are due to return on 16 October are worried because there is no information available online. Will the Secretary of State please let me know where they can obtain information, and whether their return is protected or not?

Chris Grayling: The full repatriation exercise lasts for two weeks, and at the end of that time there will be a very small number of people left abroad. We know that, at that point, the sector as a whole will be able to absorb those passengers; it could not have done so a week ago, given the numbers involved. The Civil Aviation Authority will be contacting those people this week and keep its helpline available for a considerable time after the repatriation effort has been completed, and we will work to ensure that they can return home straightforwardly. They will be entitled to refunds through credit cards, through the ATOL scheme, and so forth. The crucial difference is that when the company went into administration the sector could not have coped with the number of people involved, but by next week absorbing the small number of passengers who remain will not be a problem.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Jobs and opportunities that come from access to regional airports and flights mean a lot to Members in all parts of the House, and, indeed, to my constituents who can access Southampton airport. Will the Secretary of State thank Barclays for supporting my constituents and their families? Members of the Hamble Aquatics Swim Team who were due to go to Lanzarote were reimbursed more than £9,000 so that they could train for county, national and regional championships. Their head coach, Amy Rodger, ensured that more than 20 swimmers and their coaches were able to get over there by working with local television stations and Barclays. Will the Secretary of State also thank the many other companies that have done so much to help our constituents?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend’s words speak for themselves. I am very grateful to Barclays for providing that help, and I know that a number of other businesses have done the same. The credit card companies in particular have been very constructive in their dialogue about sharing the cost of the repatriation with us, and Lloyds was especially good at getting out of the traps and working with us. I think that this was a moment when corporate Britain behaved in the right way, and worked alongside us to do the right thing.
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Having spent five years working for the Association of British Travel Agents and lobbying for greater holiday protection, may I extend my thanks to the people working hard for that and ask the Secretary of State to extend it to travel agents and tour operators? What hit does he expect the Air Travel Trust Fund to take as a result of Monarch’s collapse, and can he give an assurance that the ATOL protection contribution will not go up, which would mean holidaymakers having to pay more in future?

Chris Grayling: We will not know exactly how much until we have gone through the numbers in detail with the administrator. We do know that only a relatively small proportion of Monarch customers were ATOL protected, because the nature of the business was mostly flight-only. I will happily inform the House once we have gone through all the details, which will take a bit of time, but it will not be a substantial proportion of the total, because of the small proportion of customers who are covered.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Gatwick-based airlines such as easyJet and Virgin Atlantic for stepping up and offering alternative employment to Monarch employees who now find themselves out of work?

Chris Grayling: I am very grateful to the airlines for the way they have responded, and they have done so in a variety of ways. It was a real team effort at Gatwick, with airline staff, airport staff and others coming together to deal with the immediate issues for passengers, and then really working to get Monarch employees sorted out as quickly as possible. I am very grateful to the staff at Gatwick, as I am to those at all the five airports affected.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State said in his statement that the collapse of Monarch Airlines was deeply regrettable, so I wonder whether he will support the call by the pilots’ union for a probe into what exactly happened around the collapse.

Chris Grayling: I suspect that there will be exactly such a probe, but I also suspect that it will be led by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and her Transport Committee. I do not want to gainsay what the Committee will do, but I would expect a rigorous inquiry, and my Department and the CAA will be very happy to co-operate with it.

Mr Speaker: That was a very speedy recovery from the intoxicating effects of conversation with the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), and a very useful guide to new Members on how to perform at a moment’s notice in the way that the hon. Gentleman has done. He did signal earlier that he wished to be called, so I was not picking on him.

Chris Grayling: Of all those involved, I feel most deeply for those who made bookings but have now lost trips and holidays. I very much hope that we can get Monarch staff into employment quickly. I hope that we can get all the passengers back safely and well. For those who have lost bookings, it is a deeply traumatic time, and we heard some very sad stories last week. Anyone who booked with ATOL protection or who booked using a credit or debit card will be able to get a refund. My advice to anyone in that position is always to ensure that they have at least one of those cover options available in case something like this happens again—let us keep our fingers crossed that it does not for a very long time.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Monarch has failed to consult its 1,800 employees on redundancy. What estimate has the Secretary of State made of the costs of compensation for those affected workers?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Lady will know, there are statutory provisions for when businesses go into administration, because they tend not to be able to consult employees about redundancy. It falls to us to try to sort them out, and that is what we will seek to do. There are statutory provisions for compensation for people in these circumstances, but my hope is that the financial impact on them will be limited, given the number of companies looking to recruit as quickly as possible.

James Cleverly (Bracknell) (Con): Although the distance between Stansted, my local regional airport, and Luton, which is Monarch’s home airport, is relatively small, some people will be displaced, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Willesden (Stevens Timms) mentioned. What plans has the Department put in place to ensure that those who are displaced during the recovery phase can get back to their most local home airport?

Chris Grayling: That will become a particular issue this week. We have brought 80,000 people back, but there are still about 30,000 left. We have emplifier planes this week and greater consolidation of planes. We have 747s operating, and clearly a 747 replacing a short-haul Monarch aircraft leaves a gap for seats, so we are bringing flights together and more people will arrive back at a different airport. There will be a coach waiting for them that will take them straight back to their original airport, and the airports are making special arrangements on carpark access and fees to ensure that people do not lose out as a result. The CAA is managing a big bus operation and those people will get back to the place where they started.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Actually, the fall in the value of the pound was a factor in the collapse, although I agree with the Secretary of State that another factor was the UK ban on flights to Sharm el-Sheikh. Since that ban was introduced, the Egyptian authorities,
with UK support, have gone to enormous lengths to improve security at that airport. I believe that every other western country has now lifted its ban. Could we now lift ours before even more people lose their jobs?

Chris Grayling: The right hon. Gentleman will know from his experience in Government that we take security issues very seriously. We have looked exhaustively at the issues around Sharm el-Sheikh. We have not yet taken the decision to resume flying there. I would love us to be able to take it, but we have to be mindful of the security concerns and the risks to the travelling public of the United Kingdom. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that as soon as we feel that we can take that step, we will. We hold back only for good security reasons.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): This has been a massive exercise in repatriating citizens and our thanks should go to the Civil Aviation Authority and others that made it happen. Will the Secretary of State please confirm the cost of the repatriation exercise? Are insurers, credit card companies and banks playing their part in reimbursing the taxpayer?

Chris Grayling: We expect the total gross costs of the repatriation to be around £60 million. We will recover money from all those different groups, and I will in due course be able to tell the House exactly how much the taxpayer has contributed. However, my hon. Friend can be reassured that we are very focused on making sure that there is clear burden sharing, and that it is not only the taxpayer who pays.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I applaud the Government’s efforts in bringing back passengers who were not protected by ATOL. In the modern era of mass travel by air, would it not be sensible to look at legislation around ATOL and cover both hotels and air fares in case something similar happens in future?

Chris Grayling: That will clearly be debated again and has been considered before. The issue is that we would have to apply a levy to every single air fare sold in the UK, whether for a UK airline or otherwise. We could not simply apply a charge to a UK-based airline for which we were responsible—we would have to charge Ryanair, Air France and Emirates passengers as well. Effectively, we would be putting up air passenger duty. I am not saying that we should not do that, but if we were to we would need to use great thought and care beforehand.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): My constituents in Redditch are incredibly hard working—thanks, no doubt, to the Government’s amazing record of job creation. However, they look forward to their well-deserved holidays and price competition has contributed to their being able to take those breaks. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he sees no risks in the airline market that he ought to be considering?

Chris Grayling: That concern has been raised by the Opposition as well. The first thing to say is that our aviation sector is very strong. If people visit our airports, as I do, they will find that virtually every one will say that this has been a record year in terms of the number of passengers carried and that there have been record days in their history. Passengers are not stopping flying—more and more passengers are flying, and I am confident that that will continue.

I am also confident that we have good airlines that are growing fast: look at the success of easyJet and Jet2. Tour operators are also doing well. I am confident that the sector will grow and develop; there is demand for slots and runway space and there are acquisitions and new investments in new centres such as Jet2’s investment in Stansted. We should be confident about the sector. We can never rule out problems in the future or be certain that no airline will ever run into difficulties again. That is why we have to think through whether we need to take steps to make sure that there is proper protection for consumers. But we should be confident in our sector.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend, his Department and the CAA for delivering the largest ever peacetime repatriation. As he will be aware, the UK insolvency framework does not allow insolvent airlines to continue flying, unlike what happened with Alitalia in Italy and Air Berlin in Germany. Will my right hon. Friend consider looking at the insolvency framework again in that light?

Chris Grayling: We will certainly give some thought to that. It is very noticeable that other airlines have been able to carry on flying in administration. The risk, of course, is that an aircraft could easily be impounded by an international airline. One of the reasons we sought to hire our own fleet was to remove that risk. If we had used the Monarch planes, there was a danger that, if they arrived at an airport and a local creditor decided to take action, the plane might have been unable to return. That is something we always need to weigh in the balance. We need to look at what happened with Air Berlin and Alitalia and see whether there are lessons to be learned, but first and foremost our task should always be to protect passengers whose journeys might otherwise be at risk.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Price wars, stiff competition and a change in travel habits all contributed to Monarch’s failure. My constituents in Wealden have been in touch about their holidays and business trips being ruined. Can the Secretary of State confirm that he and his ministerial colleagues have visited returning passengers at UK airports and say what feedback he has received?

Chris Grayling: I met the first flight back at Manchester airport last Monday and my noble Friend Lord Callanan visited Leeds Bradford airport on the same day to meet people coming back. I have had a lot of letters from people who were able to travel back on the repatriation flights saying how grateful they were and how smooth it had been. There are bound to be some hiccups on the way—we had weather problems in Funchal, which led to some cancellations—but in overall terms this has been a very smooth effort and a great tribute to a team of people in the CAA who are not airline specialists, but who have come together to run an airline in a way that was, frankly, enormously impressive.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)
Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I do not think the hon. Gentleman realised how popular he was—and I do not think anyone else did either.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Secretary of State agree that, although every lost job is a human tragedy, the British aviation industry remains robust and resilient? I am reminded of 2012, when British Midland International collapsed, with the loss of 1,200 jobs at East Midlands airport in my constituency. These are very highly skilled people who are quickly absorbed back into the economy. Unemployment in North West Leicestershire remains at a record low of 1%.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am delighted that we have a thriving sector, with more than 6,000 vacancies, for which the 1,800 people who have lost their jobs can apply. I am also delighted by the fact that easyJet is saying, “We want to hire 300 of them straightaway. They’re good people; we want them.” I am very confident for their future. All the support they need in the short term is being provided, but I am pretty clear that in a thriving sector those people will have a strong future.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Quite clearly this has been a huge repatriation and logistical task. Can the Secretary of State confirm, though, what entitlement passengers who have not yet travelled—I am sure most of us have them in our constituencies—have to a refund?

Chris Grayling: We will be continuing to give advice and guidance to those people for some considerable time. We will also be contacting people this week to see and give credit where credit is due; it has been a simply remarkable achievement to repatriate such a large number of passengers in such a short period, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, his Department and the CAA on putting this together. Here we are on the first Monday back after the conference recess, and we could have been faced with having 110,000 British citizens stranded overseas. Instead, thanks to his actions, 80% of them are already back and the rest can be confident of coming back on time.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those kind words. They are a tribute to the work done by people right across Whitehall—nine different Departments and organisations were involved—by those who have gone out to man the departure lounges at airports around Europe and by the people operating the airline. This has been a fantastic effort, they have done a brilliant job for all of us and I am very grateful to them.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to make sure that there is no loss in capacity and that excess slots that have now emerged are allocated as quickly as possible?

Chris Grayling: The fact that there is now some debate over the value of the slots as they are taken up by other airlines shows that there is a queue of operators waiting to move in where Monarch has been. We have already heard from Jet2 that it is looking to pick up some of the slack that Monarch has left behind, and I have no doubt that we will see others moving in very quickly as well. Our sector is thriving, those gaps will be filled and there will be lots of flight opportunities in future.
The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on our plans for leaving the European Union. Today, the fifth round of negotiations begins in Brussels and this Government are getting on with the job of delivering the democratic will of the British people. As I set out in my speech in Florence, we want to take a creative and pragmatic approach to securing a new, deep and special partnership with the European Union which spans both a new economic relationship and a new security relationship. So let me set out what each of these relationships could look like, before turning to how we get there.

I have been clear that when we leave the European Union we will no longer be members of its single market or its customs union. The British people voted for control of their borders, their laws and their money, and that is what this Government are going to deliver. At the same time, we want to find a creative solution to a new economic relationship—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must calm themselves; a little hush, please. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) has had something for breakfast which I counsel colleagues to avoid.

The Prime Minister: At the same time, we want to find a creative solution to a new economic relationship that can support prosperity for all our peoples. We do not want to settle for adopting a model enjoyed by other countries. So we have rejected the idea of something based on European economic area membership, for this would mean having to adopt—automatically and in their entirety—new EU rules over which, in future, we will have little influence and no vote. Neither are we seeking a Canadian-style free trade agreement, for compared with what exists today, this would represent such a restriction on our mutual market access that it would benefit none of our economies.

Instead, I am proposing a unique and ambitious economic partnership. It will reflect our unprecedented position of starting with the same rules and regulations. We will maintain our unequivocal commitment to free trade and high standards, and we will need a framework to manage where we continue to align and where we choose to differ. There will be areas of policy and regulation which are outside the scope of our trade and economic relations where this should be straightforward. There will be areas which do affect our economic relations where we and our European friends may have different goals, or where we share the same goals but want to achieve them through different means. And there will be areas where we want to achieve the same goals in the same ways, because it makes sense for our economies. Because rights and obligations must be held in balance, the decisions we both take will have consequences for the UK’s access to the EU market and for EU access to our market. But this dynamic, creative and unique economic partnership will enable the UK and the EU to work side by side in bringing shared prosperity to our peoples.

Let me turn to the new security relationship. As I said when I visited our troops serving on the NATO mission in Estonia last month, the United Kingdom is unconditionally committed to maintaining Europe’s security. We will continue to offer aid and assistance to EU member states that are the victims of armed aggression, terrorism and natural or man-made disasters. We are proposing a bold new strategic agreement that provides a comprehensive framework for future security, law enforcement and criminal justice co-operation: a treaty between the UK and the EU. We are also proposing a far-reaching partnership on how, together, we protect Europe from the threats we face in the world today. That partnership will be unprecedented in its breadth and depth, taking in co-operation on diplomacy, defence and security, and development.

Let me turn to how we build a bridge from where we are now to the new relationship that we want to see. When we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019, neither the UK nor the EU and its member states will be in a position to implement smoothly many of the detailed arrangements that will underpin the new relationship we seek. Businesses will need time to adjust and Governments will need to put new systems in place, and businesses want certainty about the position in the interim. That is why I suggested in my speech at Lancaster House that there should be a period of implementation, and that is why I proposed such a period in my speech in Florence last month. During this strictly time-limited period, we will have left the EU and its institutions, but we are proposing that, for this period, access to one another’s markets should continue on current terms and Britain should also continue to take part in existing security measures.

The framework for the period, which can be agreed under article 50, would be the existing structure of EU rules and regulations. I know that some people may have some concerns about that, but there are two reasons why it makes sense. First, we want our departure from the EU to be as smooth as possible, so it would not make sense to make people and businesses plan for two sets of changes in the relationship between the UK and the EU. Secondly, we should concentrate our negotiating time and capital on what really matters: the future long-term relationship we will have with the EU after the temporary period ends.

During the implementation period, people will continue to be able to come and live and work in the UK, but there will be a registration system—an essential preparation for the new immigration system required to re-take control of our borders. Our intention is that new arrivals would be subject to new rules for EU citizens on long-term settlement. We will also push forward on our future independent trade policy, talking to trading partners across the globe and preparing to introduce deals once the implementation period is over. How long the period should be will be determined simply by how long it will take to prepare and implement the new systems we need. As of today, those considerations point to an implementation period of around two years.

As I said in Florence, because I do not believe that either the EU or the British people will want us to stay in the existing structures for longer than necessary, we could also agree to bring forward aspects of the future framework—such as new dispute resolution mechanisms—more quickly, if that can be done smoothly. At the heart of the arrangements, there should be a double lock: to guarantee a period of implementation, giving businesses and people the certainty that they will be able to prepare
[The Prime Minister]

for the change, and to guarantee that that implementation period will be time-limited, giving everyone the certainty that it will not go on forever.

The purpose of the Florence speech was to move the negotiations forward, and that is exactly what has happened. As Michel Barnier said after the last round of talks, there is a “new dynamic” in the negotiations. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), for all he has done to drive through real and tangible progress in a number of vital areas.

On citizens’ rights, as I have said many times, this Government greatly value the contributions of all EU citizens who have made their lives in our country. We want them to stay. In Florence, I gave further commitments that the rights of EU citizens in the UK—and UK citizens in the EU—will not diverge over time, and committed to incorporating our agreement on citizens’ rights fully into UK law and to making sure that the UK courts can refer directly to it.

Since Florence, there has been more progress, including reaching agreement on reciprocal healthcare and pensions, and encouraging further alignment on a range of important social security rights. I hope that our negotiating teams can now reach full agreement quickly.

On Northern Ireland, we have begun drafting joint principles on preserving the Common Travel Area and associated rights, and we have both stated explicitly that we will not accept any physical infrastructure at the border. We owe it to the people of Northern Ireland—and indeed to everyone on the island of Ireland—to get this right.

Then there is the question of the EU budget. As I have said, this can only be resolved as part of a settlement of all the issues through which we are working. I do not want our partners to fear that they will need to pay more or receive less over the remainder of the current budget plan as a result of our decision to leave. The UK will honour the commitments that we have made during the period of our membership. As we move forwards, we will also want to continue working together in ways that promote the long-term economic development of our continent. That includes continuing to take part in those specific policies and programmes that are greatly to our joint advantage, such as those that promote science, education and culture and our mutual security. As I set out in my speech at Lancaster House, in doing so, we would want to make a contribution to cover our fair share of the costs involved.

I continued discussions on many of these issues when I met European leaders in Tallinn at the end of last month. In bilateral discussions that I have had with Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Szydło, President Tusk and the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, there was a welcome to the tone set in Florence and the impact that it was having.

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Preparing for life outside the EU is also about the legislative steps that we take. Our European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will shortly enter Committee, carrying over EU rules and regulations into our domestic law from the moment that we leave the EU. Today, we are publishing two White Papers on trade and customs, which pave the way for legislation to allow the UK to operate as an independent trading nation and to create an innovative customs system that will help us achieve the greatest possible tariff and barrier-free trade as we leave the EU. Although it is profoundly in all our interests for the negotiations to succeed, it is also our responsibility as a Government to prepare for every eventuality, so that is exactly what we are doing. The White Papers also support that work, including setting out steps to minimise disruption for businesses and travellers.

A new, deep and special partnership between a sovereign United Kingdom and a strong and successful European Union is our ambition and our offer to our European friends. Achieving that partnership will require leadership and flexibility not just from us, but from our friends—the 27 nations of the EU. As we look forward to the next stage, the ball is in their court, but I am optimistic that we will receive a positive response, because what we are seeking is the best possible deal not just for us, but for our European friends too. Progress will not always be smooth, but by approaching these negotiations in a constructive way—in a spirit of friendship and co-operation and with our sights firmly set on the future—we can prove the doomsayers wrong, and we can seize the opportunities of this defining moment in the history of our nation.

Much of the day-to-day coverage is about process, but this, on the other hand, is vital. I am determined to deliver what the British people voted for and to get it right. That is my duty as Prime Minister. It is our duty as a Government, and it is what we will do. I commend this statement to the House.

4.44 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement.

Sixteen months on from the referendum, no real progress has been made. The Prime Minister delivered yet another definitive speech designed to herald a breakthrough that instead only confirmed the confusion at the heart of Government. If we want to judge the progress the Government have made since triggering article 50, we should not just look at the latest Florence speech. We should also look back at the Prime Minister’s last big Brexit speech in January, where she outlined 12 objectives for Brexit negotiations. How many of those objectives have the Government met 10 months down the line? The answer—none.

The Florence speech in fact demonstrated the scale of the mess the Government are making of these negotiations. Fifteen months on from the referendum, we are still no clearer what the future of this country will look like. The question must be asked: what on earth have the Government been doing all this time—wasted. The answer—none.

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or how long it will last. The Prime Minister said the implementation period would last “around two years”, yet the Foreign Secretary interprets that as two years and not a second more and the Chancellor hints it might be more. He is here; he could correct us on that. The Prime Minister told us that, during a transition, “access to one another’s markets should continue on current terms”.

Yet at the Conservative party conference, the Secretary of State for International Trade contradicted that and said:

“We will leave… the single market and the customs union, at the end of March 2019.”

The Immigration Minister told his party conference that freedom of movement “as we know it” will end in March 2019, so how does this square with the Prime Minister’s assertion that we “continue on current terms” during the transition? It cannot be both. Will the Prime Minister clear up the confusion and tell the House exactly what her implementation period means in terms of the single market, customs union and freedom of movement?

On the financial settlement with the EU, the Prime Minister has offered to commit funds to ensure that no EU member state has to pay more into the EU budget until the end of the current framework. We welcome this sensible offer. However, can she confirm whether the UK will be willing to pay money to the EU post-transition to access programmes that benefit this country? It is an important issue for many parts of Britain.

On the issue of citizens’ rights, the Prime Minister says this is an area where progress has been made with the EU. I am sure that many colleagues in this House will testify to the level of concern and, indeed, desperation of many of our constituents who come to our surgeries across the country in fear that families and friendships will soon be ripped apart. [Interjection.] No, it is not scaremongering. This is a serious issue that affects many people in this country—day in, day out—who are, frankly, frightened of the future. So I call on the Prime Minister to clear up the confusion and tell us exactly what her implementation period means in terms of citizens’ rights.

On Northern Ireland, we welcome the drafting of joint principles, but, 15 months on from the referendum, we should be beyond platitudes, and negotiating the practicalities.

The speech in Florence was supposed to put “momentum” into the Brexit negotiations. It is staggering that after—[Interruption.]—

Mr Speaker: Order. There was a lot of noise when the Prime Minister began her statement, and I indicated that people should calm down. The same applies now: the right hon. Gentleman will be heard, he will be heard with courtesy and he will be heard in full.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is staggering that, eight months after triggering article 50, the Government have made so little progress. The Secretary of State for International Trade said a deal with the EU should be the “easiest in human history” —[Interruption.] That is what he said. Now, the reality for this Tory Government is beginning to bite, but if things do not improve, the reality may soon begin to bite for the jobs and living standards of the people of this country.

These negotiations are the most important in Britain’s recent history—vital to our future and vital to our economy. Just at the moment when Britain needs a strong negotiating team, we have a Cabinet at each other’s throats. Half the Conservative party want the Foreign Secretary sacked, the other half want the Chancellor sacked. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) that I am advised that he is being groomed for statesmanship. I say to the aspiring statesman that it is, in the circumstances, impolitic at best, and rude at worst, for him to point. I am trying to help the hon. Gentleman.

Jeremy Corbyn: Rather than fighting over their own jobs, the reality is that millions of people’s jobs and living standards depend on the success of these negotiations. If this Government cannot negotiate a deal for Britain, they should make way for a team that can.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about what has happened over the last 15 months. Well, I will tell him what has happened: this Government have triggered article 50 and are negotiating the leaving of the European Union. We are negotiating the practical details that need to be in place to ensure that, first of all, we get the best possible deal for the UK and that, secondly, we get a deal where the withdrawal is as smooth and orderly as possible.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about a number of the issues. He says that the Florence speech was due to give momentum to the talks; indeed, it has given momentum to the talks. But I happily say to him that the last thing we need in these talks is his Momentum.

The right hon. Gentleman said, “Will we leave the single market and the customs union in March 2019?” Yes, and I have said that we will. He said, “Will freedom of movement as we know it end?” and I have said yes. I have set out in the statement I made today—if he had read it—the point about the difference that will come in during that period.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about citizens’ rights. There is considerable agreement between us and the European Union on this issue; there are some remaining issues to be dealt with. I have been very clear at every stage that we want EU citizens in this country to stay. We welcome the contribution that they have made. But I am also clear that we want UK citizens in the 27 member states of the European Union to be given their rights too. Everybody in this House of Commons should have a care for UK citizens as well as for EU citizens.

Finally, he says that this is an historic moment. It is indeed an important moment for this country. This is an important and significant set of negotiations that will set this country’s future for generations to come and I am optimistic and ambitious about what we can achieve for our country. He said that we need to negotiate carefully. Yes, we do. That is why the article 50 letter reflected the principles I set out in the Lancaster House speech.
The Florence speech updates that and reflects the principles of the Lancaster House speech. What a contrast with a Labour party that said that it would respect the result of the referendum, then voted against the withdrawal Bill. The Opposition said that they wanted to leave the single market; now they might stay in the single market. They said that staying in the customs union was deeply unattractive; now they want to stay in the customs union forever. They used to be against a second referendum, but now they have refused to rule it out. With such a confused position on Brexit, no wonder it is said that there will be a run on the pound if Labour gets into power.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Will the Prime Minister reassure me that the statement clarifies that it is not the Government’s policy to seek, on the one hand, to remove all trading barriers with countries such as Japan and the United States, while on the other hand, to create new regulatory customs and tariff barriers with the European Union, with which we have free trade at the moment and which is our largest trading partner in the world? If that is correct and consistent with what she has just said, she will no doubt recall that ultra-Brexiteers, including the present Foreign Secretary, assured citizens during the referendum campaign that there would be no difference at all with our trading relationships with Europe, because they needed to sell us their Mercedes and their prosecco. Would it not be best to proceed with the negotiations on the basis that our ideal solution would be to stay in the single market and the customs union? She could then seek to negotiate changes to the conditions attached to that, which are the things to which she refers when she tries to explain where she is at the moment.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend has always been consistent on the issue of membership of the European Union. When people voted in the referendum for the UK to leave the European Union, I think they were voting for us to take control of our borders, our laws and our money. If we were to remain full members of the customs union and the single market, that would bring with it the continuing jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice forever and would also bring a requirement for free movement. I set out in the Florence speech and in the offer we made to the European Union what I have described previously as a deep and special partnership with the EU. He is right that we want to ensure that our trading relationship with the European Union can be as tariff free and as frictionless as possible, but we also see advantage in being able to negotiate new trading agreements around the rest of the world. I think that that is to the advantage of the United Kingdom, and that is what the Government will be pursuing.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We respect the fact that the UK has voted to come out of Europe, but we were told during our referendum in 2014 that if we stayed in the UK, our future in Europe would be preserved. Scotland has voted to remain and, in particular, wants to stay in the single market and the customs union, so it is about time that we got some respect from the Government. The situation is now critical. I can hear Conservative Members chuntering; if they want to catch the Speaker’s eye, they are entitled to do so, but perhaps they might show a little respect. These are important matters, and the public are watching this behaviour.

We stand on the brink of being dragged out of the European Union with no deal in place and facing the automatic introduction of World Trade Organisation rules. That would be a catastrophe for Scotland, threatening up to 80,000 jobs in our country alone. The President of the European Commission has said that “miracles” need to happen for there to be any progress in the negotiations. Meanwhile, the European Parliament voted last week to stop negotiations moving on to the next phase, citing lack of progress. The clock is running against the Prime Minister in more ways than one.

On EU citizens’ rights, the Government continue to drag their heels. There must now be a universal declaration from the Prime Minister that EU citizens in the UK can have their current citizenship and rights protected after exit day. No ifs, no buts—do it today. I urge the Prime Minister to listen to the voices of the devolved Administrations. We will not accept the legislation as it stands; it is a complete violation of the Scotland Act and the biggest power grab since devolution. Indeed, just last week the author of Article 50, Lord Kerr, said that Westminster was trying to break the founding principle of the devolution settlement.

The SNP has set out three key tests on Brexit for this Government: first, as an absolute minimum, we want continued membership of the single market and the customs union; secondly, the Government must declare now, without delay, that EU citizens’ rights are guaranteed; and, thirdly, the Government must accept that the withdrawal Bill cannot proceed in its current form. Will the Prime Minister live up to those asks, and will she end the immoral floundering over EU citizens’ rights now?

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) that it is a considerable discourtesy to walk out of the Chamber past the Member who is on his feet in the middle of his attempted intervention. It is a point that is so blindingly obvious that the hon. Gentleman would not need to be notified of it, but as he apparently was not aware of the discourtesy involved he now is. When the House has settled down, perhaps we can hear the leader of the Scottish National party who, I remind the House, must be heard.

The Prime Minister: As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows, there will be a meeting next week of the Joint Ministerial Committee, which brings the devolved Administrations together with Ministers here in the Government. There have also been bilateral discussions between the First Secretary of State and Ministers in the Scottish and Welsh Governments on an ongoing basis over the summer.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to citizens’ rights. I remind him that during the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, which he referred to, the First Minister
told EU nationals that if the EU did not allow an independent Scotland to rejoin—it was clear that the EU would not do so—EU nationals would "lose the right to stay here."

[Interruption.] SNP Members are shaking their heads, but that is what the First Minister said at the time.

The right hon. Gentleman referenced what I said in my statement. My statement was about the position of the United Kingdom Government in the UK’s negotiations with the European Union, and Scotland is part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend and very good friend, our Prime Minister, on her plans for the negotiations. May I press her and ask her to elaborate a little further? In her statement, she made it clear that the ball was back in the EU’s court. Is it not reasonable to expect that, given all the negotiations and discussions and the progress that has been made, the EU should now engage the United Kingdom on something that is beneficial to it and us—namely, an ongoing free trade arrangement, to be completed by March 2019?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we see increasing interest in moving on to talk about that issue. That will absolutely be, as he says, not just in our interests but in the interests of the European Union; that is what is right for us both. We want the matter to be negotiated by March 2019, so that the UK comes out of the European Union knowing what the new partnership and trade agreement will be.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said very clearly she believes that, on her plans, we will be out of the customs union and the single market by March 2019. That was not the impression I got from the Florence speech. Will she therefore explain how the arrangements she is seeking for the transition differ from being a member of the single market and the customs union for the period of the transition?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that, as we leave the European Union in March 2019, we will leave full membership of the customs union and full membership of the single market. What we then wish is a period of time when practical changes can be made, as we move towards the end state—the trade agreement—that we will have agreed with the European Union. We have to negotiate for the implementation period what the arrangements would be. We have suggested that that should be a new agreement—an agreement that we should be able to operate on the same basis and on the same rules and regulations.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend's Florence speech stressed the fundamental principles of UK democracy and accountability in this House, upon which all else depends. The Opposition voted against the withdrawal and repeal Bill, and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972. Does she agree that our voters have every right to hear a public explanation from the Opposition—remainers and reversers—about why, despite the referendum vote, they still subscribe, under the EU’s undemocratic system of lawmaking, to the closed-door Council of Ministers, where decisions are taken behind closed doors and largely in secrecy, which contrasts so vividly with what goes on in this House, with Bills and amendments, and with speeches and votes recorded?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point the finger at the Opposition on this particular issue. They claim they are going to support the result of the referendum, yet they vote against the very Bill that will put that in place. Not only do they do that, but in voting against the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, they have voted against bringing environmental regulations into UK law and bringing workers’ rights into UK law. The Labour party voting against bringing workers’ rights into UK law; it is this Government who are supporting them.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Four days ago, the deputy governor of the Bank of England said that the UK financial services industry needs a transitional deal by Christmas, or else it will begin implementing its contingency plans—the Chancellor is well aware of them—to shift jobs and activities across the channel. Telling the House that the ball is now in the EU’s court, as the Prime Minister did today, does not exactly give those businesses the comfort and certainty they require, so will she tell the House what her plan now is to break the negotiating logjam and achieve such a deal in time for it to do its job for a sector of the economy that employs over 1 million people?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the Florence speech set out some details on an implementation period and how we think that that could operate. We now wait for the European Union to respond to the detail that we have set out. I recognise the concerns that business has for an implementation period, but I would say, finally, to the right hon. Gentleman that this whole process is not helped by the vast majority of Labour MEPs voting against moving on to the next phase of talks.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement that the Government will press on with working out the details for no deal. That is a very prudent thing to do and means there will be no cliff edge for British business. Does she agree that it will send the very good message to the European Union that we can do that, but that she is offering something so much better and more positive that it is in their interests to accept, and that any deal they counter with has to be better than no deal?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think we have offered a very good arrangement for the future to the European Union—I think it is not only in our interests, but in their interests as well—but as any prudent Government would, we continue to make plans for every eventuality. I think that is the only sensible thing for us to do.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is it the Prime Minister’s understanding that, if necessary, it is possible to halt the article 50 process?
The Prime Minister: The position was made clear in a case that went through the Supreme Court in relation to article 50. The Government have made it clear that we have no intention of revoking that. We will be delivering on the vote of the British people.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): As my right hon. Friend wrestles with the inevitable compromises essential to securing the opportunities of Brexit in the national interest, and in view of this enormous administrative challenge, will she consider refining the machinery of government by creating an inner Cabinet to drive forward the work across the Government and thus retain greater grip and control over the whole process?

The Prime Minister: Ministers meet in a variety of forms to consider these issues. Before the Florence speech, I was pleased that the whole Cabinet came together and signed up to that speech. Of course, we have various discussions about the various elements of the negotiations, but I can assure my right hon. Friend that we are aware of the need to be able to ensure that we can make swift decisions when that is necessary in the negotiating process.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): May I press the Prime Minister to clarify her answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw)? He was not asking about Government policy: he was asking a straightforward question. Have the Government received any legal advice that the article 50 notice can be revoked?

The Prime Minister: I said to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) that the position in relation to the revocation of article 50 was addressed by the Supreme Court in a case that went before it. It was very clear about that. We were clear as a Government that we were not revoking it and it was clear in its consideration of the case of no revocation of article 50.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her excellent Florence speech. It was widely welcomed, not just by British business but by people across the country, and it marked a real attempt by her to form a consensus on Brexit between the people across the country, and it marked a real attempt by her to drive forward the work across the Government and thus retain greater grip and control over the whole process.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), which—with respect to the Prime Minister—was not about the Gina Miller case but about Government legal advice, can she tell the House whether the Government have received legal advice that article 50 is revocable?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman—perhaps I should have said this initially to the right hon. Member for Exeter—that of course we do not comment on legal advice that has been received, but the position was very clear in the case that he mentioned. The Supreme Court was clear that it operated on the basis that article 50 would not be revoked.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her most encouraging statement. Recently in Washington, I found widespread enthusiasm among our American friends at the prospect of signing a free trade deal—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is in a very excitable state. I have always enjoyed listening to the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson). I have been doing so for 20 years and I want to continue to do so. He can normally be heard, but the braying and banter was so loud I could not hear the fellow. Let us hear him.

Mr Paterson: I will say it again, Mr Speaker, for your benefit. I found widespread enthusiasm right across the American political firmament for the prospect of signing a free trade deal with the United Kingdom. Our American friends will welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, yet again, that we will leave the customs union, as that is a prerequisite for signing a deal. Will she give them her best estimate of when, after March 2019, we can sign a deal with third countries of a friendly nature, like the United States of America?

The Prime Minister: I echo the comments that my right hon. Friend has made. That is exactly what we found in our dealings with the American Government. We have a working group on issues relating to trade working with the American Government. The exact arrangements during the implementation period will be a matter for the negotiations, but we are clear that during the implementation period it should be possible for us to continue to negotiate trade agreements. We would not enter into anything that was contrary to the agreement we had come to with the European Union.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been asked several times about implementation of transition and has not made any sense at all in the answers she has given. She has said today that she foresees a framework for transition of around two years but because the chances are that the details of that may come quite late in the process, it will not have been possible for anyone—Governments, businesses or individuals—to have taken the practical steps necessary to move to that position. To get as smooth as possible a withdrawal, so that there is not a cliff edge, we have that period of implementation. That moves us to the final arrangement that has been negotiated by March 2019.
along the existing structure of EU rules and regulations. The existing structure has the single market and customs union at its heart. How can what she is proposing for her implementation period be anything other than continued membership of the customs union and the single market, which our companies require?

The Prime Minister: I thought that I had explained this in response to one of the hon. Gentleman’s hon. Friends. As of 29 March 2019, we leave the European Union. That means we leave full membership of the customs union and full membership of the single market. We will, as part of that—this is our proposal to the EU—have negotiated an implementation period to take us in a smooth and orderly process, so that the practical changes can be made towards the end agreement with the European Union. How long that needs to last will depend significantly on the nature of that agreement and how different it is from the current arrangements, but during that period what we are proposing is that it is in the interests of individuals and businesses on all sides to be able to continue to operate on the same basis as they do today. That would be part of the withdrawal agreement that we propose to negotiate with the European Union, so that negotiation would be about the basis on which we operate during the implementation period.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I was going to call a fellow, but he has beetled out of the curtilage of the Chamber so I cannot. He may beetle back again, but we will see.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm unequivocally that any new laws agreed under the acquis communautaire will no longer run in any way in this country and after 29 March 2019 the European Court of Justice’s jurisdiction will no longer apply in this country? How can what she is proposing for her implementation period be anything other than continued membership of the customs union and the single market, which our companies require?

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disputes will be resolved and what will happen if either side chooses to change or diverge from the rules and regulations. That is the position regarding our trade agreement with the EU, except that we already operate on the basis of the same rules and regulations. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will bring the EU acquis into UK law, so the key question, which will be part of the negotiations, is how we manage divergence on either side after that. It is the same as with any trade agreement.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend believe that the EU genuinely wants a dynamic and creative future trade relationship with the UK in accordance with her vision? If so, where is the evidence for it?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I believe that such a relationship is in the interests of the remaining 27 members states of the EU and that as they come to look at this issue—they were not previously focusing on it, but Florence has now triggered their thinking on it—they will see the benefits of such a relationship not just to us but to them as well.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The European Commission talks continually about the need for Her Majesty’s Government to provide certainty and clarity. Is there not one area in which we could provide that certainty and clarity very plainly, today and in our negotiations? Could we not make it clear that in March 2019 we will withdraw from the common fisheries policy, take back all our fisheries, and ensure that our fishing communities actually take back control of who fishes in British waters?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to suggest that when we leave the European Union one of the aspects of leaving it will be leaving the common fisheries policy. Of course, we will need to consider the arrangements that we want to put in place here in the United Kingdom for the operation of our coastal waters and the operation of fishing around them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the positive tone of her Florence speech, and for the constructive meetings that have taken place since then. Does she agree that it is in the interests of consumers on both sides of the channel for us to have a deep, special and bespoke partnership that covers goods and services? In that regard, I am thinking particularly of the hundreds and thousands of German consumers who have bought life insurance products from British insurance companies, and who will find that unless there is agreement, their pension plan savings are lost.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made an important point. People often assume that only UK businesses and UK individuals will be affected, but actually people living in the remaining 27 countries of the European Union will also be affected, which is precisely why I think that the deep and special partnership to which my hon. Friend has referred is in the interests of both sides.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The shambles and division on the Front Bench would be funny if there were not such serious consequences for our economy, for jobs, and for the future of this country and the world. The Prime Minister is simply not being honest about a whole series of consequences for this country. [Interruption.] Excuse me, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister is not being transparent with the public about the consequences for our economy. Will she say how much money she has put aside to deal with a disastrous “no deal”, and will she publish the economic assessments made by the Department for Exiting the European Union—whose Secretary of State is sitting next to her—of the impact on 50 sectors in our economy?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about the position of the Government. The position of the Government is very clear, and was set out in the Florence speech. It is our offer to the European Union, and we await discussions with the EU about that particular issue. I have also made it clear, from Lancaster House onwards, that when it is possible for us to give information and updates on the negotiations, we will do so, but we will do nothing that would undermine our position in the negotiations.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Given that Germany and France export more to us than we export to them, what discussions has the Prime Minister had with her French and German counterparts? Has she asked them to pressurise the EU institutions to secure a good deal for those countries, which means negotiating faster, more effectively, and with a shared understanding of what we can both gain from this deal?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that I do have discussions with the leaders of France and Germany, and, indeed, with the leaders of other EU member states. Others, such as the Dutch and the Belgians, also have a significant economic interest in our future relationship because of the economic activity at their ports. We discuss arrangements for the future with the leaders of those countries, and, as I said a little earlier, there is a growing sense and recognition of the importance of that deep and special trading relationship to the future of both sides.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister please tell the House the cost of Brexit to the public purse (a) if there is a deal and (b) if there is no deal?

The Prime Minister: It is not, of course, possible to answer that question at this stage. We are negotiating a deal, and we will not have negotiated that deal until, I suspect, close to the end of the period that has been set aside for it. At that point, we will be able to see what the benefits of the deal will be for the future of the British economy.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her detailed statement. It was in stark contrast to what was said by the Leader of the Opposition, who left the House completely in the dark about his own position. Can the Prime Minister solve a dilemma for him? Why, if Labour Members are so concerned about Brexit, or even, indeed, about the
security of EU nationals after we leave, could they not bring themselves to debate the matter at all at their own party conference in Brighton?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. At the Labour party conference they actually refused to have a full debate on the issue that they now say is a matter of such consequence to them, but then that is typical: they take one position on a Tuesday and the next position on a Wednesday.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We did debate the European Union and Brexit at our conference actually, but let me ask about another matter. As a result of our membership of the European Union, there are some 200,000 Britons living in Catalonia, and roughly the same number of Catalan Spaniards living in the UK. I do not think that anybody in this House supports the police brutality that we have seen in Spain, but the French Government have been absolutely clear that they will not recognise Catalonia if it tries to declare itself independent unilaterally. Will the Prime Minister today make that same guarantee for Britain?

The Prime Minister: None of us wants to see the sort of violent scenes that we saw on the streets of Catalonia; I want to see this situation resolved peacefully, as I am sure do all hon. Members. But we are very clear as a Government that the Spanish Government have the right to uphold the Spanish constitution and that all parties should be operating under the rule of law.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I very much support the Prime Minister in the final destination that she set out again today, but I have to say that her speech in Florence seemed like a reward for the EU’s intransigence. Can she confirm that we buy around £70 billion more in goods and services from the EU each year than it does from us, and that when we leave we will be the EU’s single biggest export market? Can she therefore confirm that there will be no more rewards for the EU’s intransigence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is of course right that the trading relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union is very important to the EU, as well as important to the UK. What I did in my Florence speech was set out a vision—a proposal—for the future relationship between the UK and the EU, based on our current relationship, showing how we can develop that relationship in a way that is in the interests of both sides. This has switched the dial in our negotiations, and obviously we look forward to being able to enter negotiations on those aspects in more detail.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister said in her statement that she proposes “a unique and ambitious economic partnership” with the EU. If she is confident that the new unique and ambitious economic partnership that she envisages will be better for the UK economy than our current quite ambitious economic partnership and membership of the single market and customs union, then, further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), why will she not today, alongside her White Papers, finally publish the list of the sectors of the economy for which she has undertaken impact assessments and their results, so that the public can have the information about the impact of Brexit on the economy?

The Prime Minister: The full list of sectors will be published shortly.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Following the recent German elections, power has moved from Berlin to Paris, so will the Prime Minister remind President Macron of the importance of being a good neighbour to the United Kingdom, because post Brexit, France will still be our neighbour, tens of thousands of French people will still want to visit and study here, and vice versa; we will still want to co-operate on environmental issues and immigration; and we will still wish to preserve our special defence arrangements with the French?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about not only our future relationship with the EU, but our future bilateral relationship with France. I can assure him that all the discussions that I have with President Macron, and that other Ministers have with their opposite numbers, are based on our not only maintaining but enhancing that bilateral relationship.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Do the two crippling tariffs imposed by the Prime Minister’s American friends on British Bombardier jobs prove that Brexit or no deal will create a jobs hell?

The Prime Minister: The judgment that came out of the American Department of Commerce is a preliminary one. We await the final judgment of that Department, and the issue can then go to a trade Commissioner. We continue to work with the US and Canadian Governments, and Boeing and Bombardier, to bring about a resolution to this dispute and protect the important jobs in Northern Ireland. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will be making a statement on the matter tomorrow.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): After the funfair of the conference season, may I welcome the Prime Minister back to her place as leader of this party, this Government and this country, and to the serious business of government? I congratulate her on the steely determination that she showed last week, including her setting out of an inspiring commitment to see this issue through on behalf of the next generation.

When the Prime Minister heard the Leader of the Opposition refer to Labour’s policy of a transition phase, did she, like me, think that that must be the one that she herself announced in her Lancaster House speech? The only transition in Labour that I see is the one from a once great party to a party of Venezuelan socialism.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on, on both counts. Indeed, in my Lancaster House speech, I said: “I want us to have reached an agreement about our future partnership by the time the two-year Article Fifty process has concluded. From that point onwards, we believe a phased process of implementation” to enable us to
“prepare for the new arrangements...will be in our mutual self-interest.”

So we thought of the implementation period quite a long time ago.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I have asked the Prime Minister the same question three times in this Chamber, given the importance of the European Parliament in the negotiations. Last time I asked her when she would address the plenary of the European Parliament. When will she do that?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady. I have spoken to the President of the European Parliament about my going over there and speaking with either the plenary or the Conference of Presidents of the European Parliament. I believe that our offices are negotiating on a date at the moment.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I am sure that Members on both sides will confirm that listening to senior Danish politicians is a very good idea. Would my right hon. Friend recommend that the leaders of the other 27 EU countries listen to the wise counsel of the Danish Foreign Minister, who suggests that they stop playing games and now move on to negotiating our future trade arrangements?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who reaffirms the point I was making earlier: there are many in the European Union who do believe that the time is now right to move on to trade negotiations.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Stephen Kinnock.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): A perfect segue, Mr Speaker—

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): In Danish!

Stephen Kinnock: I won’t do it in Danish—not today.

The Prime Minister’s commitment to a transition deal was a welcome reality check in this whole process, but the European Parliament resolution of 3 October states that a transition period can happen only on the basis of the existing EU regulatory, budgetary, supervisory, judiciary and enforcement instruments. Does the Prime Minister agree with the terms of that resolution?

The Prime Minister: That is the view of the European Parliament in its resolution. In my statement and my Florence speech, I put out that we expect that the implementation period will be based on the current rules and regulations, but of course this is part of the negotiation.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): To negotiate an outcome consistent with the ambition that my right hon. Friend has set out, is it not absolutely essential that we invest in preparations against the possibility of no agreement at all?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend on that, and that is precisely why that is exactly what the Government are doing.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister knows that the Supreme Court did not opine on the question of whether article 50 was revocable, because the question before it was about our involvement. Therefore, why, when asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) what advice she had had recently, did she rely on the Supreme Court?

The Prime Minister: The point that I made in relation to the Supreme Court is that the court proceeded on the basis that article 50 would not be revoked; and I gave the answer to another of the hon. Lady’s hon. Friends about what the Government do or do not say about legal advice.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on the tone she has set in the run-up to the decision of the October Council? I also thank her for the reply she has just given to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), making it clear that the Government have followed the recommendations of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs in its March report about the need to prepare for no deal. Will she confirm that individuals and businesses will also need to be in a position to make their contingency plans? Does she accept that, if the negotiations on the final settlement are postponed for at least two months in October, the Government will have to surface their no-deal preparations, so that businesses and individuals can share in making the necessary preparations? This will also rely on a vote of the European Parliament, and we saw what happened last week, with the Labour MEPs supporting a position that was absolutely against the interests of the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister: First of all, obviously, I still expect that we will be able to negotiate a good deal, and that is what we are working for. It is important that we take the businesses along with us and that we discuss and hear from businesses their reaction to the various issues being raised in the negotiations. Indeed, I and a number of other Cabinet Ministers were present at the business advisory council that was held in No. 10 Downing Street today. However, my hon. Friend’s question seemed to be based on the premise that, if we did not get a formal notification of sufficient progress in October, that would mean that we would not be likely to get a deal. I do not believe that that is the case. I believe, as has been indicated by other hon. Friends, that we are seeing more of a movement on the European Union side to recognise the importance of discussing the trade negotiations and to consider the necessity of an implementation period.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Let me begin by commending the Prime Minister warmly for keeping going at her conference speech. It could not have been easy.

The Prime Minister—and, I am sure, other Members of the House—will be well aware that the Good Friday agreement of 1998 was voted on by thousands and thousands of people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and secured a majority in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I am very pleased today that the Prime Minister has said that we owe it to the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of
Ireland to get Brexit right. Will she therefore please look seriously at introducing a Government amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to guarantee on the face of the legislation that no regulations made under the Bill will repeal or amend the Good Friday agreement? That would be very helpful to people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The Prime Minister: Both this Government and the Irish Government—and indeed, increasingly in the discussions we have been having on the issues relating to Northern Ireland and the Republic, the European Union—have confirmed an absolute commitment to the Good Friday agreement. We are very clear that we stand by the Good Friday agreement, which, as the hon. Lady said, was hard negotiated and welcomed by a majority. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that nothing that we do in the Brexit negotiations in any way jeopardises the implementation of the Good Friday agreement.

Mr Shaiiles Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on her very encouraging and positive statement? Does she agree that it would be helpful if British businesses with interests to ensure that we get a good deal negotiated by March 2019 will not only affect Britain, but hugely affect the other EU countries as well?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made a very important point, and I certainly would encourage businesses and others to ensure that they are making that clear with their contacts in the 27 member states. I believe that that is already happening, and I certainly meet people from across the European Union who make exactly the point that it is in their economic interests to ensure that we get a good deal negotiated by March 2019.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Over the past 17 years, Wales has received £9 billion in grants from Europe. During the Brexit debates and the referendum, Tory Ministers said that Wales would not lose out as a result of Brexit. Can the Prime Minister tell us how much funding Wales will get—additional funding—after Brexit is completed?

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Nice bid.

The Prime Minister: Nice bid, as the Secretary of State says. Let me say to the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.]

Well, he changed from “not losing out” to “additional money” in his question. We have been very clear in relation to a number of elements where people currently receive funding related to the EU, such as under the common agricultural policy and structural funds, that we will meet any agreements entered into before we leave the European Union—in relation to the structural funds, as long as they meet UK priorities and are value for money. Thereafter, once we are outside the EU, it will be for us here in the UK to decide how we wish to ensure that different parts of the country are supported in the way that is necessary for them. What I have put forward is that there should be a shared prosperity fund, which will look at the diversity and disparity within regions and between regions, and we will act accordingly.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Last week, I met a leading UK industrialist and we discussed Brexit and the hundreds of thousands of people employed in the sector in this country. Although he wanted to see an agreement and understood entirely the Prime Minister’s implementation period, he is concerned that, if no agreement is reached, it is no good saying that on 29 March 2019—he needs to know now what Brexit will look like, as he can plan for that eventuality. He asked whether the Prime Minister could publish those plans prior to Christmas.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concerns people have about ensuring they know what the situation is going to be. The Government are working on what steps will be necessary for whatever the eventuality—whether we do negotiate a deal or whether we do not—and in doing that we are holding discussions with business.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I thank the Prime Minister for prior sight of her statement. We have heard a great deal from her about the non-border that she envisages between the north of Ireland and the Republic, but I do not think we have heard a word about the border between Wales and the Republic of Ireland, even though the north Wales route through Holyhead is second only to Dover in its volume of traffic. Will she tell the House what she is doing to ensure that north Wales does not grind to a halt after Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I am very clear that as we look for a solution for the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland we do not want to set up a new border between the island of Ireland and the mainland of the United Kingdom. Obviously, what happens at the border the hon. Gentleman refers to will depend on the future partnership that we agree with the EU. We have put some proposals forward for customs arrangements that could pertain. When we get into the negotiation of that phase, we will be able to look at those issues in detail.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that we will rule out a second referendum, unlike the Labour party, whose Members seem to be confused as to whether we should be speeding up the process or reversing it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am very clear that there will be no second referendum. The British people were given their opportunity to choose, they chose to come out of the European Union and that is what this Government will deliver.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My constituent Jessica Simor, QC, from Matrix Chambers has done important work on the legal status of revoking article 50, and she is of the opinion that it can be revoked. The Supreme Court case that the Prime Minister referred to rules that the Government cannot trigger article 50 without an authorising Act of Parliament. Article 50 provides for the notification not of withdrawal but of an intention to withdraw, and the Prime Minister

Nice bid.
will be aware that in law an “intention” is not a binding agreement. So I ask her once again: will she publish the legal advice she has received, which is important for the wider public to see?

The Prime Minister: I say to all those Opposition Members who have stood up today and asked about the legal position on revoking article 50 that the position is very clear. The British people voted in a referendum to leave the European Union.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that no money will be paid for access to the single market, for two reasons? First, the EU sends a lot more goods and services to us than we send to it. Secondly, there are countries around the world that export to the EU single market without any problems at all.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is of course right that the EU has a number of trade agreements with countries around the world that enable those countries to deal with the single market on the basis set out in those agreements. As I have set out, we will honour our commitments—that is important for us as a country—and there are some areas, possibly in fields such as security and science, in which we will want to continue to be members of specific projects and programmes. If we do, it will be right that we pay an element of the costs of those projects and programmes. Those are the two elements that I have set out in our financial proposals.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Has the EU agreed in principle to a transitional arrangement with the UK?

The Prime Minister: Having an implementation period will be part of the negotiations. The EU has previously referenced the possibility of there being such a period, but we need to negotiate the length of that period and its implementation.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): There are five key NATO countries that are committed to the defence of our continent that are not members of the EU, and we will soon join that group. Will the Prime Minister give me an assurance that she will work closely with those countries, and with countries such as Poland that are on the frontline with Russia, to ensure that NATO continues to be the supreme defence posture for our continent, rather than a single European army?

The Prime Minister: We continue to believe that NATO is the bedrock of European security and we will continue to play a full role in NATO, as we have done over the years since its formation. I am pleased that we have British troops involved in NATO operations on the eastern border of the EU, protecting that border and giving that guarantee of European security.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that there will be no new infrastructure on the Irish border and no customs border over the Irish sea, and that we will not remain a member of the customs union. If all those options are ruled out, can she explain exactly what kind of customs border we will have?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Lady has a look at the paper on that issue that we published in the summer.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her excellent answer to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), but the vile brutality of the Spanish police really does disturb me. Any bold new strategic agreement on law enforcement and criminal justice cannot allow bullying of that nature, whether by member states or EU negotiators.

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that the agreement that we envisage entering into with the remaining states of the EU on security, criminal justice and law enforcement matters will be mutually beneficial, particularly on the sort of data we can exchange across borders to ensure we are able to deal with the many challenges we face, especially those relating to human trafficking and modern slavery, organised crime and, of course, terrorism.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): As the vice-chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, I recently visited Jersey with the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). While there, we discussed the customs union, a customs union and a customs arrangement, but we did not get around to talking about a customs system. The Prime Minister has used various words to describe the border, from somewhere between hard and soft, to now talking about a physical border. Further to the comments by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and the Prime Minister’s rather flippant answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), when will the Prime Minister do the communities on the Irish border the courtesy of visiting them to explain her analysis of the customs system in relation to the Good Friday agreement?

The Prime Minister: In relation to that issue, we have looked at the broader question of the customs arrangements and, as I say, we have published a paper that contains proposals for systems that could operate in future. In relation to the Northern Irish border with the Republic of Ireland, we are discussing with the parties in Northern Ireland, the EU and the Irish Government what the future arrangement might look like, but the EU recognises that it is not possible to confirm what that future arrangement will look like until we have looked into some of the wider issues of the future partnership between the UK and the EU.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Kristian Jensen has joined Wolfgang Schäuble—both are Finance Ministers—in saying that the negotiation would be easy were it not for the game playing. It is the modus operandi of the EU to bully on occasion, to brief the media negatively on occasion, and to bide for time right up until the wire. May I tell my right hon. Friend not to be naive—not that she would be—and listen to the ridiculous comments from Labour Members who have never negotiated their way out of a paper bag, let alone the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We know the things that can be done in negotiations to appear to make life difficult. What matters is that the Government have their vision very clearly set on the end...
state and the arrangement we wish to negotiate, and we are firmly committed to that negotiation. I can think of no better person than my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to deal with the sort of methods that my hon. Friend set out.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Is not the major issue the fact that the Government’s Brexit agenda is being driven by the Foreign Secretary on the pages of the Daily Telegraph—that is, when he is not moonlighting as Bernard Manning? Will the Prime Minister listen to the Scottish Government and not sacrifice 80,000 jobs on the altar of internal party politics by leaving the single market?

The Prime Minister: I have explained this on a number of occasions, but I shall do so again. The British people voted to leave the European Union. Leaving the European Union means not being a full member of the single market and the customs union. We have set out a proposal for a deep and special economic partnership with the EU that continues to enable both sides to trade with each other in a way that protects jobs and brings increasing prosperity to the United Kingdom and to the European Union. I say again, as I have said in the past: if the hon. Gentleman wants to ensure that jobs in Scotland are protected, he needs to make sure that Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The very last thing my constituents would want is the revocation of article 50. The British people voted for Brexit, they expect the Prime Minister to deliver it, and they have every confidence that she will. Will she reassure the people of Gibraltar that no agreement will be made unless they are fully included in that agreement, and that Spain has no veto over their future?

The Prime Minister: We are very clear on that. We have continued to hold talks with the Gibraltar Government—as, indeed, we have with others—to make sure that they are fully aware of the negotiations as they go along. We are very clear about Gibraltar’s position. My hon. Friend makes an important point about the Labour party and the rest of the Opposition: they claim that they want to respect the referendum vote, yet here they are trying to suggest we should revoke article 50. That is the exact opposite of what the British people wanted.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): As a lifelong negotiator who has stood up for workers all my life against the actions of Conservative Governments, I say to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) that the jewel in the crown of British manufacturing is the automotive sector. It is a world-class success story that has transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers, and more than half our cars are sold into the EU. Will the Prime Minister provide more detail on the implementation period? The industry is facing mounting problems, particularly given the importance of regulatory alignment to the sector and the integrated nature of European supply chains. If the Government get this negotiation wrong, they will do grave damage to the automotive sector and thousands of workers will pay the price with their jobs.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the importance of the automotive industry, but there are also a number of other industries here in the United Kingdom that are very important for our jobs and future prosperity. We have set out the framework for the implementation period. I have been clear both here and in the Florence speech about the rules and regulations that are required during that implementation period, but they have to be negotiated with the European Union, and that is exactly what we want to start to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate remaining colleagues. However, although we have been blessed with commendably succinct replies from the Prime Minister, the length of some questions has equalled the eloquence with which they have been expressed, so there is a premium on brevity.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Businesses in my constituency are concerned about outcomes, particularly the frictionless movement of goods across Europe and the mutual recognition of standards, rather than membership of particular institutions. Will the Prime Minister reassure me that, during the second phase of negotiations, those outcomes will be the Government’s priority?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. That is exactly why we have said that we want to negotiate a new agreement and a new partnership with the European Union. It will be the interests of businesses across the United Kingdom that will be part of what is driving us towards that new arrangement.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement to the House today. I listened with interest when she stated that she was both a proud Unionist and strong on the Union. I take heart from that. I want to give comfort to the people in Northern Ireland on this matter of not having a soft or hard border down the middle of the Irish sea. I want that assurance because the people of Ulster feel that they are being set on the sidelines.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give that assurance. We do not want to see a border down the Irish sea either. We want to maintain the integrity of the internal market of the United Kingdom.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Former New Zealand High Commissioner Lockwood Smith has said that there are few advantages to the UK in leaving the EU without bringing back ambitious responsibility for our own trading arrangements across the world. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, while we all accept the importance of a short period of transition, we should not lose sight of the longer-term goal of pursuing our own trade deals?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are real opportunities for the UK in negotiating those other trade agreements around the world. Although we will have that implementation period, we will be negotiating and ensuring that we can put into place trade agreements that will be of benefit both to this country and to jobs in this country.
Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The writing is not on the wall for this Government as some say: it is just slowly sliding off. Why did the Prime Minister choose to deliver her statement from Florence when Ealing town hall would have had her? What was the cost of flying the entire Cabinet there in pounds or euros or in terms of the carbon footprint—any will do?

The Prime Minister: I am asked why I gave a speech about our future relationship with Europe on mainland Europe. I do not need to give any answer to that.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that her concept of an implementation phase will only be enacted if firm plans and a schedule for implementation of permanent new arrangements between the EU and UK have already been agreed?

The Prime Minister: Yes. It is very simple: the implementation phase is a period for practical changes to be put in place. We cannot know what those practical changes are until we know the end state that we are driving towards. Having agreed on that end state and that future relationship, the period of implementation is purely to put the practicalities in place.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Within these important plans for leaving the EU, will the Prime Minister please confirm that safeguards have been put in place to ensure that the promised £350 million will be made available for our NHS?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, one reason why people voted to leave the EU was to control our money, so we will not be sending huge sums of money every year in perpetuity to the European Union. When we have left the European Union, this Government will be able to decide how we will deploy the funds that are available.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her statement, and the tone of pragmatism in her Florence speech. Does she agree that, throughout this time and the implementation period, it will be right and proper to place our commercial interests front and centre in these matters regardless of any arcane or theoretical considerations, and that patience and pragmatism are not only important in the interests of this country, but most consistent with the spirit of our party too?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to put such emphasis on patience and pragmatism. That is exactly the spirit in which we are entering these negotiations. He is right that we need to consider fairly and squarely the commercial interests. We must also ensure that the deal that we reach is clearly in the United Kingdom’s national interest.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In her statement, the Prime Minister referred to a post-Brexit United Kingdom as being an independent trading nation. Can she explain how that will apply to just-in-time manufacturing in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: An independent trading nation is one that is able to determine its own trading policy and to enter into trade agreements around the rest of the world. What the hon. Gentleman is talking about is something that depends on having frictionless borders, and, as I have said, we want to negotiate with the European Union as frictionless a border as possible.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is good to hear not only the Prime Minister’s optimism about the chances of striking a trade deal, but that we are preparing for no deal. In order to give businesses as much time as possible to adjust, will she consider drawing a line in the sand with a date attached to it by which, if we have not made sufficient progress, we will finally and simply walk away from the negotiating table?

The Prime Minister: One of the important points about negotiation is that we keep our hands as free as possible. We do want to ensure that we take business with us. As I have said, there are a number of ways in which we are discussing the future arrangements with business. The implementation period is important, and I hope that we can get on to discuss that as early as possible with the European Union, but we do need to maintain a degree of flexibility in our negotiating positions.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): By having not yet sat down to talk about trade, the European Commission has shown that its priorities are the integrationist European project and punishing this country for having the temerity to choose to govern ourselves. That does not bode well for any deal. Can the Prime Minister tell us what balance of resources is going into contingencies in the event of no deal compared with the amount of resources going into the negotiations?

The Prime Minister: We are doing the work that is necessary to ensure that we are prepared for whatever outcome emerges from the negotiations. The hon. Gentleman is right: there have been a number of speeches recently that suggest a more integrationist approach for the EU in future. I am clear that it is important that we are that self-governing nation and that we get that good deal with the European Union because it is in the economic interests of both sides.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Given that the EU has a £70 billion annual trade surplus with the UK, does the Prime Minister agree that the European business community should be far more vocal in its communications with its political leaders, because failure to conclude a deal would not reflect well on its competence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right: it is important for businesses based in the European Union that we achieve a good trade agreement and a good new economic partnership with the EU, and I encourage them to make that point.

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Would the Prime Minister care to comment on the remarks of John Bruton, who said that the EU cannot really trust the UK because of the huge divisions within her Government? Is that the impression we are giving our European partners?

The Prime Minister: No, the European Union is very clear on our position as it was set out in the Florence speech.
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): At times such as this, it is important that Britain speaks with one voice—[Laughter] The Opposition may laugh, but if that is the case, does my right hon. Friend agree that it was deeply disappointing that British MEPs voted against a furthering of the negotiations, which would have taken them to the crucial stage? Was she as surprised as I was that she was the only party leader to withdraw the Whip from those individuals?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is in the interests of this country that we move forward on those trade negotiations. I was astounded to hear that any MEPs had voted in favour of a resolution saying that sufficient progress had not been made and that we should not move to those trade negotiations. I have acted regarding the two Conservative MEPs who voted against British interests. It is time that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) did something about the 18 Labour MEPs who did so.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I very much welcome a transitional period for businesses to adjust, as will businesses and port authorities in my constituency. The Prime Minister has mentioned on three occasions the Irish border with Welsh, Scottish and English ports. I have read the paper this summer. I have read the House of Lords report and what the EU has said. Will the Prime Minister be clear on whether there will be a special customs union with Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? Can she categorically say that there will be no physical borders in Welsh ports?

The Prime Minister: I have referenced the paper that the hon. Gentleman says he read this summer. It sets out a couple of options for the customs relationship overall between the UK and the EU once we have left the European Union. Of course, we need to get into these negotiations so that we can sit down with the European Union and discuss what will work for both sides. I repeat what I have said: we want to maintain the European Union and discuss what will work for both these negotiations so that we can sit down with the European Union. Of course, we need to get into those negotiations so that we can sit down with the European Union and discuss what will work for both sides. I repeat what I have said: we want to maintain the European Union and discuss what will work for both those individuals?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion. I will certainly give careful thought to it. I am sure that businesses in his constituency are thriving and recognise the value that is brought to them by having such a good constituency Member of Parliament.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she wants a unique trading relationship with the EU after Brexit, so she will be pleased to know that the citizens’ assembly convened last month by the constitution unit at University College London reached the same conclusion. However, the members of the assembly also said that if a bespoke deal was not possible, the next best thing would be for us to remain in the customs union and single market. May I invite the Prime Minister to look at that piece of work? It was deliberately arrived at and there was a three to one majority among leave and remain voters for retaining those options if a deal cannot be achieved.

The Prime Minister: We are always happy to look at any contributions made to the debate around the negotiations, but I repeat that the European Union has been very clear about the indivisibility of the four pillars. If we want to be a full member of the single market and a full member of the customs union, it means maintaining free movement and the overall jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. That is, effectively, not leaving the European Union. The British people voted to leave the European Union.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister’s statement, particularly her comments about EU citizens and, equally importantly, UK citizens living and working in the EU. She is right that the ball is very much in the EU’s court, but will she ensure that the issue remains front and centre and is resolved as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that confirmation and reassurance. We said we wanted this issue to be looked at from an early stage and it has been. Significant progress has been made and I hope that the negotiators will be able to clear up the remaining issues between us in relation to citizens’ rights so that we can give citizens that absolute certainty.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm that there will be no new restrictions at the UK border for EU citizens wishing to come into the UK during the implementation period of “around two years”? I think that is the implication of what she has been saying. She also said that there will be a registration scheme. Who will she require to register?

The Prime Minister: It is right that people will be able to come to live and work in the United Kingdom, but those coming from the European Union after the point at which we have left the European Union will be required to register. This is part of the building block to the new immigration rules that will be in place at the end of the implementation period.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Constituents of mine at GCHQ play an expert and invaluable role in the defence of this nation and the continent of Europe. Does the Prime Minister agree that the unconditional guarantee of ongoing intelligence co-operation is a constructive step that should help to pave the way to early trade talks?

The Prime Minister: I would hope that the European Union would recognise the benefit of our security relationship and the relationship we have on matters of...
counter-terrorism, as well as on law enforcement and criminal justice more widely. That relationship is in both our interests, and I hope the EU recognises its importance.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister say which particular elements of full membership of the single market she thinks should not apply in any transitional arrangements?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, being a full member of the single market is indivisible from full membership of the customs union, free movement and the complete jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. We will be negotiating an implementation period and the arrangements on which we are able to operate. We will negotiate those as a country that will no longer be a member of the European Union.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that her position on Gibraltar is clear. If that is the case, can she explain why she made no reference to Gibraltar in her statement? Will she clarify what conversations she has had with the Spanish Government about the Gibraltar-Spain border?

The Prime Minister: We are very clear that the issue of borders and relationships is one that we wish to discuss as part of the overall future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. As I said earlier, we have been continuing to discuss with the Government of Gibraltar their particular concerns and interests to ensure that we can provide a deal that works for Gibraltar as well as the United Kingdom.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister agree that in the haste to seize control of laws, borders and money, no consideration has been given to how that is best achieved within the British state itself? Would it not be more satisfactory to convene a constitutional convention that would properly consider how the distribution of legislative and regulatory governance across the UK is achieved through each component part of the United Kingdom, including England itself?

The Prime Minister: We are doing a very simple thing. We are putting into place the wishes of the British people as expressed in a referendum and we are negotiating towards that future deal. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman talks to the leader of his party. The Leader of the Opposition says that we are being too slow, but the hon. Gentleman says we are being too hasty.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister seems to have failed to notice that the vote in the European Parliament was 557 votes to 92—a clear rejection of the Government’s chaotic strategy. It is confusing for everyone and, most of all, deeply damaging for business confidence and future investments. When will we hear exactly when the transitional arrangements will be in place? Businesses need to know now.

The Prime Minister: As I implied in my statement and have said in answers to questions, we have put forward a proposal for the implementation period. But this is a negotiation, which means that we need to negotiate the details of the implementation period with the European Union. The European Parliament gave that view, although it is not a binding vote. If the hon. Lady wants us to get on and negotiate the implementation period, she should have suggested to those 18 Labour MEPs who voted against that resolution, not in favour.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I gently remind the Prime Minister that if she wants to make a habit of suspending Conservative parliamentarians who act against the British interest, she really does not have to go as far as Brussels to find some prime candidates. Given her often professed concern for the fate of UK nationals living in the European Union, how does she feel about the fact that when we had the opportunity to debate that precise matter in Westminster Hall on 12 September, not a single Conservative Back Bencher saw fit to remain for the entire 90 minutes of the debate? Does that not speak volumes for the real lack of concern that her party has for the 1.5 million Brits overseas and the 3 million Europeans living here?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman cannot have it all ways. The Scottish National party complains to me that I am not making unilateral declarations about EU citizens here. My point is very clear: we have the interest of UK citizens in hand as well and we want to consider that interest. We are working on that. We are actively ensuring the interests of those UK citizens through the negotiations. It is not about standing up and talking about it; it is about doing something about it.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the Prime Minister and to colleagues.
Points of Order

6.19 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to announce that I misled the House of Commons inadvertently on the last day before the recess. I said that the Facebook page “Unauthorised Amanda Solloway” had been taken down, but I was completely wrong, unfortunately. The hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson), who could have had it taken down, continues to misunderstand what he is doing. Compass is a company that went into administration, and our former colleague is the wife of one of the directors, but she was not and is not involved. The page continues to pursue Amanda Solloway, but never mentions any other directors or their wives. Is there any way we could insist that this Facebook page is taken down, because it is misleading the public?

Mr Speaker: Facebook pages are not a matter for the Chair. It may be that the hon. Lady—I am very grateful to her if she is bidding for an increase in my powers—thinks that I should enjoy such, and a vista of opportunity I see before me opening up.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): No.

Mr Speaker: “No,” says the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), chuntering from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of the thrust of the implication of the hon. Lady’s point of order, but I can only say that it is not a matter for me. What I would say is that she has amplified her concern very eloquently this afternoon, and if she wishes to communicate her contribution here to wider audiences, including within social media, I am sure it is not beyond her wit to do so. I think we will have to leave it there for today.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the Bombardier situation in my constituency. During this afternoon’s proceedings, you may have detected some glib and cavalier references to what is a growing and concerning trade dispute between the United States, Canada, Boeing and Bombardier, but 4,000 constituents are employed in my constituency, 1,000 of whom are directly responsible for, and engaged with, the C series. Given my concerns and those expressed by other Members throughout today’s proceedings, can you advise us whether there has been an approach by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and whether we, as Members who want to see a quick resolution to this spiralling problem, will have an opportunity to do so through a ministerial statement or some other means in the days to come?

Mr Speaker: Well, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman will be disappointed. I think he will have been attending keenly to the Prime Minister’s statement. On the assumption—I think, safe—that he was doing so, he will have received some encouragement. I think the Prime Minister gave a fairly clear indication of an intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement on that matter. I do not mind letting the hon. Gentleman know, just between us, that I myself have had an indication from the Government that this matter will be treated of sooner rather than later. Statements to the House have concluded for today, and we will shortly move on to other business, but there are other days ahead, and knowing what an eager beaver the hon. Gentleman is, and how assiduous he is in the representation of his constituents’ interests, I feel sure he will be in his place, for example, tomorrow.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last month, the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) raised a point of order, and I have informed him that I wish to raise this point of order, in relation to the procurement of repair work to Big Ben and the potential award to a company that has been described as being at the heart of the blacklisting conspiracy. Members of this House received a statement by email from the House of Commons Commission saying that that contract had been awarded and that the cost had, indeed, increased. Can you advise us whether the House of Commons Commission will make a statement to this House so that hon. Members such as myself, the hon. Member for Streatham and others can raise our concerns at the awarding of this contract?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The simple and short answer is that there are questions to the representative of the House of Commons Commission in this Chamber. It is perfectly open to the hon. Gentleman to question the representative of the Commission, and I have every expectation that he will do so.

I would just add en passant that the House of Commons Commission, of which the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) is the hon. Gentleman’s party’s representative and, therefore, is well familiar with all this, has considered this matter carefully. We are conscious of our obligations to conduct any tender process fairly, and we expect the highest standards of our contractors. This is the subject of statements by the House authorities, with which I think the hon. Gentleman implied he is familiar, but all matters can be the subject of further questioning and scrutiny, and that is perfectly proper. I am sure he will be in his place to participate in any such exercise.

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker: If there are no further points of order, I will in a moment call the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The right hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

6.25 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I stand to request your permission and the leave of the House that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the policy of Her Majesty’s Government in relation to the proceedings of this House.

Before the House went into recess, we considered two Opposition day motions concerning, first, public sector pay and, secondly, student tuition fees. In both these debates, the Government argued against the motions before the House. When the questions were put, however, they remained silent, and each motion was passed without Division. In particular, it was known that, in the event of a Division, Members from the DUP would vote against the Government, who would, in all likelihood, lose.

It was widely reported that because the motions were non-binding, the Government took the view that they could effectively be ignored, as has ultimately been shown to be the case. It was further suggested in some quarters that the approach taken by the Government last month is one that we should expect to become routine.

I put that to the Leader of the House at business questions on 14 September, and, significantly, she did not deny it.

I accept completely that motions of this sort are not de jure binding on the Government. De facto, however, it has long been the practice of Governments of all colours to respect the views of the House expressed in this way. Over the years, Opposition day votes have been an important means of influencing Government policy and righting wrongs. Hon. Members will recall the vote in 2009 concerning the residence rights of those who had served as Gurkhas. That was an issue resolved in this House by an Opposition day motion.

Mr Speaker, the Government are seeking to treat this House as a talking shop, rather than the place in our nation’s life where decisions of note are made. The formation of a Government that do not command a working majority in this Chamber is a rare moment in our nation’s constitutional story. It is a moment for us to assert the will of Parliament, not to see it sidelined. Those currently on the Treasury Bench will clearly find that inconvenient, but we are here to hold them to account, and not simply to do their bidding. It is for that most fundamental of reasons that I seek to bring this matter to the House for its urgent attention.

Mr Speaker: I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. Member. I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the right hon. Member the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has obtained the leave of the House. The debate will therefore be held tomorrow, Tuesday 10 October, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours, and it will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the right hon. Member’s application.
Gypsies and Travellers and Local Communities

6.29 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): I beg to move, That this House has considered Gypsies and Travellers and local communities.

We are fortunate to live in one of the most tolerant countries in the world—I would go so far as to say that Britain is the most tolerant—and underpinning that tolerance are a set of common values that the vast majority of those from all communities in our country abide by. Those values include respect—respect for the rule of law, respect for property, public and private, and respect for one another.

Whatever our political differences, I know that every member of this House wants us to live in a just and fair country where equality of opportunity flourishes and the life chances of all our children, across all communities, are enhanced, so, as we have this debate, I want to focus on four main themes. The first is the impact on settled communities when a small minority does not show respect for the rule of law. The second is the remedies that are available to the police and local councils to deal with illegal behaviour. The third is the Government’s response to date in addressing matters related to the Traveller community, as well as what, in concrete terms, we intend to do further. The fourth is what the Government are doing to improve the life chances of the Traveller community, most importantly the young.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): On the Minister’s second point, the West Midlands police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, has done a huge amount of work on these issues and has set out a number of proposals to try to deal with them, which I—and, I am sure, other Members from the west midlands—will be talking about later. Would the Minister be prepared to meet David Jamieson and a number of west midlands Members who have written to me highlighting the impact illegal incursions have on their constituents. I recognise this huge sense of frustration; indeed, I share it. In recent months in my constituency of Reading West, we have had numerous illegal encampments set up on public land, including nine separate visits to Prospect Park in Tilehurst. These incursions have caused my constituents significant distress, as each leave behind enormous amounts of waste and cleaning comes at a considerable cost to the law-abiding taxpayers.

We all aspire to peaceful and integrated co-existence between communities, where we all share the same rights and responsibilities, but there is a perception among the settled communities—our constituents—that the law does not apply equally.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I think that it would be fair to say that it is more than a perception. Many of us, certainly on the Government Benches, have heard repeatedly about this issue in our surgeries, as well as in discussions with district councillors. It is raised constantly. It is a real problem, rather than a perceived one.

Alok Sharma: Of course I will ensure that I meet the police and crime commissioner, or that a Home Office Minister does so if that is more appropriate. I have seen the piece of work that was produced, and it is an incredibly useful document.

As I was saying, we want every single child in our country to get the best education and the best start in life, and to fulfil their potential, and that absolutely includes children from the Traveller community.

I know that in today’s debate we will hear accounts of the damage left in the wake of illegal encampments and a call for local authorities and the police to do more and to move faster in dealing with them. Indeed, many Members have written to me highlighting the impact illegal incursions have on their constituents. I recognise, as I am sure the whole House does, the huge sense of frustration and anguish about the issue that many people feel.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I personally am not tolerant. My constituents are not tolerant. When Gunners Park was littered, when Trinity football ground was paved over with a travelling community, and when Cherry Orchard Park was invaded, my constituents were not tolerant. Can we have a three strikes and out rule? These people have expensive land cruisers and big trucks. If they park on council land or private land more than three times, may we give the police the power to take those assets and sell them for the good of the community and to clear up some of the mess that is left behind?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend expresses a view that many colleagues will have experienced in terms of the frustration felt by their constituents.

Let me talk about the powers the police have and about what we intend to do. As I said, many Members have written to me highlighting the impact illegal incursions have on their constituents. I recognise this huge sense of frustration; indeed, I share it. In recent months in my constituency of Reading West, we have had numerous illegal encampments set up on public land, including nine separate visits to Prospect Park in Tilehurst. These incursions have caused my constituents significant distress, as each leaves behind enormous amounts of waste and cleaning comes at a considerable cost to the law-abiding taxpayers.

We all aspire to peaceful and integrated co-existence between communities, where we all share the same rights and responsibilities, but there is a perception among the settled communities—our constituents—that the law does not apply equally.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I want to reinforce what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin). It is vital for the west midlands that the Minister meets the police and crime commissioner, as well as MPs from the area, as soon as he can to try to resolve this problem. There is a lack of resources for police and local authorities and a weakness in the law—that is meant in no way to discriminate against genuine Travellers, by the way.

Alok Sharma: I hope that what I say towards the end of my speech will give the hon. Gentleman some comfort.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Forgive me for interrupting, but will the Minister give the House the sense that he appreciates that this is not a static situation? In the west midlands, for example, the number of unauthorised incursions has doubled since 2011. This debate takes place against the backdrop of an increasing problem, not a static fact.
Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The fact that we have so many colleagues present for the debate makes it clear that this is an issue we feel deeply about. I want to re-emphasise that the law applies equally to everyone, and it must be seen to apply equally to everyone in practice.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the police sometimes see these cases as trespass, whereas many include criminal damage? If such damage has occurred, these instances should be viewed as that.

Alok Sharma: The law is very clear on criminal damage, but I want to talk about the powers the police have and what additional powers they have if there are transit sites or permanent sites available in the local area.

Let me set out the powers for local authorities in dealing with illegal encampments. First, it is important to put the number of illegal encampments in context. The January 2017 Traveller caravan count indicated that 13% of encampments were illegal, and about a third of those were on land not owned by travellers, yet no matter what the figures say, I know that illegal encampments often cause strife. We have already heard that in this debate.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am pleased the Minister has put some perspective into his comments by noting that a very small minority of the Gypsy and Traveller community is in unauthorised encampments, from within the small minority who are actually travelling—three quarters are settled in brick and mortar accommodation. Given that this is a debate about Gypsies and Travellers, I am looking forward to hearing his fourth point about the disadvantages suffered by the Gypsy and Traveller community.

Alok Sharma: I will of course talk about that, because it is an important issue and we need to be proportionate in how we handle it. We must ensure that the life chances of all communities are enhanced.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I will be contributing to the debate later, but as the Minister is talking about statistics and the figure of 13%, will he consider that, although 13% might seem like a small percentage, when a community is repeatedly affected by Travellers, it seems disproportionate?

Alok Sharma: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I just want to pick up on the last but one point about the disadvantages suffered by the Traveller community. It is extremely difficult to defuse innate concern among the settled community and potential hostility towards the Travellers if we are all suffering, and I think that all of us will have encountered periodic and repeated incursions with temporary and illegal settlements of one kind or another. With all due respect to the people who gathered the Minister’s figures, as the figures were collected in January, I suspect the result would be very different if the numbers were collected in July.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The figures that I am citing are collected in January, but also in July, and I would be happy to share them with him. The fundamental point is that every incursion and illegal encampment causes problems, and that is what matters to constituents and communities up and down the country.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Minister acknowledge that prevention is better than cure? What can be done to ensure that there are more authorised sites available, particularly in areas of the country that are feeling the pressure of unauthorised sites?

Alok Sharma: Prevention is, of course, better than cure, but it is also important that all communities abide by the law.

Local authorities and the police already have extensive powers to take action. Councils have a range of powers available to them. They can very quickly obtain a possession order to remove trespassers from land, and they can apply to the courts for pre-emptive injunctions that prevent unauthorised camping in a defined area. The police also have powers under sections 61 and 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alok Sharma: If I may proceed a bit further, I will give way.

Under section 61, the police can remove trespassers who cause criminal damage or engage in abusive and intimidating behaviour, or who have six or more vehicles on the land. The police can also seize and remove vehicles from illegal encampments. Under section 62, if transit or permanent Traveller sites are available—I think this is the point that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) made—the police can act immediately. We know that local authorities, the police and other agencies can work effectively in a multi-agency approach. There are examples of good practice across the country, and I know that colleagues will raise them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The Minister says that the police can take action quickly and that everybody should be treated equally under the law, but my constituents had to wait for days and days to have an illegal encampment dealt with. The Travellers trashed the local playground—human excrement was left on the children’s play equipment—but the police could not take action for days. My constituents believe that there is one set of rules for one community and another set of rules for others, and that the police cannot take action fast enough.

Alok Sharma: The circumstances that my hon. Friend outlines are not, unfortunately, unique to her constituency. I think each of us will have a similar example.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alok Sharma: My goodness, there are such riches when it comes to taking interventions. It is important that the available powers are used fully by the police.
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he accept that section 62A only covers the principal or highest-tier local authority? In the case of my constituency, a site just over the border in Berkshire cannot be considered for Traveller pitches. Will the Government look at how the law is drafted to make sure that it has the intended effect?

Alok Sharma: If my hon. Friend is patient, I will come on to precisely those points.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Minister has been patient with interventions. I will keep this brief, because I hope to catch your eye later, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is the Minister’s position on the law that what he has read out is good enough? I would counsel him against reaching that conclusion. The point is that the law is not good enough. It is too slow and too expensive, and the people who pay the cost are our constituents. We need legal change to make the removal of illegal encampments faster and cheaper.

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman makes the case eloquently.

John Penrose: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. I want to echo the comments that have just been made. The feedback from North Somerset Council and my local police indicates that, although the current powers are extensive in theory, they do not work in practice. They are too slow, and there are too many loopholes. The miscreant element of the Traveller community that is the cause of these problems understands the loopholes all too well, and we end up playing cat and mouse across county boundaries and authority boundaries. We absolutely need to reward the law, so that it works fast and effectively for the settled community as well as for the Traveller community.

Alok Sharma: I agree. We need fairness in the law, and we need it to be applied in a manner that works for the settled community.

Having given way to quite a few Members, I will proceed and see whether I can gallop through. As I have indicated, local authorities, the police and other agencies can work effectively together. There are examples of such work in the west midlands and Warwickshire, and I am sure that colleagues will talk about them. I agree that the police can act much faster when there are sites to direct Travellers to. That is why we expect local authorities, as a minimum, to plan for a five-year supply of deliverable and developable sites for Travellers.

The number of Traveller caravans on authorised sites rose from 14,498 in July 2010 to 17,938 in July 2016. We need all local authorities to step up to the plate in providing sites. Local authorities that meet their requirements help to limit the prevalence of illegal encampments. We expect local authorities and the police to clamp down on such encampments, but unless there are sufficient sites, the police and local authorities will not be able to use their powers fully.

In March 2015, the Government wrote to council leaders, police and crime commissioners and police chief constables about their response to illegal encampments. We were concerned that local authorities and the police were not being seen to be doing enough to stop such incursions, and we reiterated that the Government want local authorities, the police and other local agencies to work together to address incursions. We reassured a summary of the robust powers to remove unauthorised sites, but I am aware of growing concern that the available powers are not being used fully.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) rose—

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con) rose—

Alok Sharma: If I may, I will proceed. The Government have made important progress in ensuring that the needs of Travellers are balanced with those of the settled community. In 2012, the Government published the planning policy for Traveller sites, which requires planning authorities to make their own assessment of need. As I have said, that means identifying a five-year supply of deliverable Traveller sites. We revised that policy in 2015 and gave increased protection to the green belt.

Helen Whately: Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will give way to my hon. Friend, who has been very patient.

Helen Whately: I thank the Minister for giving way. I have in the past expressed frustration with my local council for not taking enough action, but there is one site in my constituency where the local council has taken action. In December 2016, three enforcement notices were served on that site, but the appeal against those notices will not be heard until March 2018, because, as I understand it, of the difficulty of getting somebody from the Planning Inspectorate to hear the appeal. I ask my hon. Friend to consider whether there are enough resources at the centre to address the problem, in addition to the steps that our local councils need to take.

Alok Sharma: I would be happy to discuss that case with my hon. Friend afterwards.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alok Sharma: If I may, I will make some progress.

We introduced a general duty to assess the accommodation needs of all sections of the community who reside in caravans, and we sought to strengthen the local authority position in determining inappropriate development by having up-to-date local plans.

We have reflected on the views about illegal encampments expressed by Members in previous debates and in letters to the Department—we are hearing those views loud and clear today—and I can announce that the Government intend to consult on the effectiveness of enforcement against unauthorised developments and encampments. We want to seek views on whether there is anything we can do to ensure that existing powers can be used more effectively. Let me be clear, however: this is not a signal to local authorities and the police that they should wait for the outcome of such a consultation. They have the powers to act, and we expect them to act.
Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for giving way. I welcome the announcement that local authorities are being encouraged to provide more settled sites, but does the Minister agree that the enforcement problems that local authorities and the police face often relate to a lack of resources, due to local government cuts?

Alok Sharma: Over £200 billion is being made available to local authorities to deal with a range of issues over the next four years. Several colleagues have made the point about cross-agency and cross-authority working, which I am sure we will hear about in this debate, and that is absolutely the way to go.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alok Sharma: If I may continue, while it is right that we seek to deal with illegal encampments, which are perpetrated by a small percentage of the Gypsy and Traveller community, we need to do everything we can to improve the life chances of that community. The Gypsy and Traveller community has had poor life chances for too long, and it is the ethnic group with the lowest educational attainment and the worst health outcomes.

When it comes to education, we expect schools to have data and evidence-led approaches to support all their pupils—whatever their backgrounds. High proportions of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils claim free school meals and benefit from our strategy to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils through the pupil premium. We have invested £137 million in the Education Endowment Foundation to help schools understand what can raise disadvantaged pupils’ attainment. As for access to healthcare, the Government have commissioned research to investigate which approaches to community engagement are most likely to be effective at enhancing trust between the Traveller community and mainstream healthcare services. That project is due to report in November this year.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s announcement that the Government will consult on solutions to this difficult problem. If I heard him correctly, he said that they will consult on whether existing powers can be better used, but will he confirm whether the consultation will consider whether new powers are necessary? Will it cover both of those things or just the first?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Colleagues and constituents will be welcome to write in to the intended consultation with all their views. The location of sites and the provision of services are matters for local authorities, so I encourage the hon. Lady to talk to her local authority about that.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I am about to conclude. I have taken quite a few interventions, but I apologise to colleagues who have not been able to intervene.

Britain is one of the world’s most successful multicultural and multicultural societies. My Department works to bring communities together—we build on what unites us—but to belong to Britain we must all embrace a common set of values, and we must all show regard for the law. We are committed to making sure that Gypsies and Travellers can benefit from the same life chances as everybody else, but we are also prepared to take strong action when people refuse to follow the law. With our intended consultation, I want to send a clear message: the Government are listening.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Opposition spokesman, it will be obvious to the House that a great many people want to speak this evening and that time is limited. I therefore warn colleagues in advance that there is likely to be a time limit on Back-Bench speeches, starting at about seven minutes and probably going down depending on the number of interventions and how long people speak for. As ever, it is for each colleague to have regard to others as well as to himself or herself.

6.55 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I feared that I had come into the wrong debate. I am fairly certain that this debate is about Gypsies, Travellers and local communities, but the Minister finished his speech—I applaud his final remarks—by making a real point about the overwhelming majority of the travelling community, who are law abiding and who live settled lives, but against whom the disadvantages are enormous. The House ought to recognise that as well as recognising, as I do as a constituency MP, that the antisocial and illegal actions of some are unacceptable. We have to get the balance of our debate right.

I will come on to discuss unacceptable encampments, but the Minister is right to say that all communities must abide by the law. Most of the travelling community does abide by the law, and we need to place it on record that the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller community are right across government, and it will be published shortly. My Department will act upon the recommendations that emerge from the audit and will also publish a new integration strategy in the coming months.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York Travellers Trust does excellent work in providing support for York’s travelling community. However, it says that the community needs proper facilities on sites, especially warm areas for children to play and learn in. Will the Minister consider that in any future planning for sites to ensure that families have proper spaces in their community?

Alok Sharma: The location of sites and the provision of services are matters for local authorities, so I encourage the hon. Member for York Central to talk to her local authority about that.
our fellow citizens. That group probably faces the biggest levels of prejudice and discrimination in Britain, and the House has a duty to do something about that for our fellow citizens. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) shakes his head, but I hope he does not disagree with that point.

A YouGov and Traveller Movement poll, the results of which were released today, rather sadly show that 10% of our fellow people would still be extremely unhappy at one of their family members having a relationship with somebody from the black or Caribbean community and that 3% would be unhappy about a relationship with someone from the White British community. However, it also found that 42% of people in this country would be unhappy about a relationship with somebody from the travelling community. That demonstrates the level of prejudice that still exists in this country.

The various parts of the Traveller community are simply not homogenous. Some 75% of the Traveller community are actually not travellers and live in bricks and mortar, just like hon. Members from both sides of the House. It is a minority—something like 1,400 of the 22,000 caravans that exist—that causes real nuisance. Government Members have been absolutely right to say that when incursions take place, as they have in my constituency, that is unacceptable to the local communities who suffer the damage, but we must still say that Gypsies and Travellers are part of the local community in many places.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tony Lloyd: I just want to make a few more points, but I will most certainly give way in a moment.

Many Travellers are in jobs—skilled, unskilled and professional—and some are public servants. I call to mind Jim Davies, a sergeant in the Thames Valley police. Along with Petr Torak of Cambridgeshire police, Jim Davies founded the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Police Association, which now has 100 members. Having spent a lot of time in recent years trying to increase the number of people from minority communities in our police force, I found it interesting that the Traveller community is one of the few groups with a proportion of people in the police that more or less mirrors its proportion in society more generally. Jim Davies, who has a Romany background, is about to retire after 30 years of serving the people of Thames valley and I applaud him.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Lloyd: I will give way to my right hon. Friend first, and then to the hon. Gentleman. which Travellers can be directed straightaway—within 24 hours—and by taking out orders against individual families who persistently break the law? When such action is taken, the public will be reassured and will live in greater harmony with the majority of the community who, as he is absolutely right to say, are acting peacefully and lawfully. We must deal with these rogue elements.

Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, but let us be very clear that if we were talking about any other minority community, the idea of stigmatising the majority because of the illegal behaviour of a minority would be unacceptable and atrocious. We must not stigmatisse them. We should act against those whose behaviour is unacceptable and illegal, but we should not stigmatisse them.

Bob Stewart: I actually lived in a Traveller community for a few days, and I must tell the House that one of the biggest problems is that people who act illegally are giving their children no chance in life because they cannot get an education. Most of the children under 17 in the encampment I was in, which was mixed, could not read. When I advocated their joining the Army, for example, they said, “Mister, you don’t understand. They wouldn’t have us.” It took me two days to understand what they meant: they could not read. This is something we have to crack.

Tony Lloyd: I am with the hon. Gentleman on that. Let me remind him, if I may, of Jim Davies, about whom I spoke a few moments ago—a Romany who spent 30 years serving the public in our police force. People like that are already the role model we want in that community.

Robert Jenrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Lloyd: I will not give way, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. I need to make a little progress; otherwise I fear I will be taking time off those who want to disagree with me later.

When a seven-year-old child says plaintively, “People don’t like us”, surely that should prick the conscience a little of those who want to stigmatisse the whole of the travelling community. When we know that 77% of the travelling community have been victims of hate crime or hate speech, when we know that less than 20% would report hate crime or hate speech to the police because they fear no action would be taken, when we know that half of the Traveller community when seeking employment—the sort of thing we want them to do—have faced discrimination, and when we know from a recent survey that four in 10 of our fellow countrymen and women would not want their child to play in a Gypsy home, we know we have a problem.

The 2015 report of the Equality and Human Rights Commission made it clear that the position of Travellers is getting worse. As the Minister conceded, we still have massive challenges to face in many different areas. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made a point about education. Some 57% of young people now get GCSEs with five grades from A to C, but among the Irish Travellers the figure is as low as 18% and among the Gypsies it is as low as 9%, so we know we have a problem. Another problem is when a teacher says to
people in her class, “There’s no point in teaching you as you’ll end up tarmacking drives.” We have a problem in our educational system.

We know that people are denied access to our health services. One of the paradoxes is that not only does that lead to a 10% lower life expectancy among Travellers, which is outrageous in modern Britain, but it means it is less likely that Traveller children will be vaccinated, which matters to everybody. We know about herd immunity, and if we allow that to continue and do not ensure access to our health services, we will actually harm the health of the population more generally.

We know that there are more Traveller children in care. The Travellers account for 0.1% of the population, but only 0.03% of apprenticeships go to people from the Traveller community. Some 5% of our prison population is made up of people from the travelling community, and 8% of women in New Hall Prison are from a Traveller background. I say to the Minister that we must now have some proper accounting. The NHS does not count Travellers as a community of note, and that has to change.

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the way in which the NHS currently accounts for people is based on the breakdown in the 2001 census. He will know, however, that an ongoing piece of work in the NHS is looking at whether we can move to using the categories in the 2011 census, which includes Gypsies and Travellers.

Tony Lloyd: That is comforting, but it is six years since the census was taken. This is not a new phenomenon, and I think we really can and must do better. I know that this is not a matter for the Minister’s Department—he is in the invidious position of having to respond for the Home Office, the Department of Health, the Department for Education and so on, which is always like drawing in proper form. Where is it? The Minister made no mention of any of these points.

Under the affordable homes programme, £60 million was available for Travellers for Traveller sites. The Minister did not tell us how many new sites have been allocated. He did not tell us where the money is, or what it has been spent on. That matters, frankly, because I can tell the House that in the south-east, for example, only 10 of the 66 local authorities now have a five-year plan for the supply of Traveller sites. In the east and west midlands—this is of concern to my hon. Friends from the midlands—only 15 of the 70 local authorities across the whole region have a five-year supply plan.

We know that only a third of local authorities in London have completed a Traveller accommodation needs assessment. The Minister said that the Government have exhorted local authorities to complete such assessments, but only a third of London authorities have done so. In my own area, two local authorities actually believe they have no need for places for Travellers, which is not acceptable. The question is: what will the Government do about that?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The idea of a five-year supply plan in relation to an itinerant population is a difficult one. As the hon. Gentleman will have heard earlier, we have seen a doubling in the number of illegal Traveller incursions in the west midlands since 2011, and in my own green-belt constituency, which has provided 26 additional pitches, we have seen a doubling in the number of illegal travelling incursions in the past 12 months. The fundamental problem is that when we seek to move the Travellers to the new pitches, they do not want to go to them.

Tony Lloyd: I will come on to the point that the right hon. Lady makes in a few moments. Of course there is an issue with unauthorised sites. I have experienced it in my erstwhile role as a police and crime commissioner and as a constituency MP. Like many other hon. Members, I believe that the law is inadequate at the moment and that we need to look at changes.

Anecdotal evidence from local authorities suggests that those that are good—which provide sites—end up attracting the Travellers who cannot be placed elsewhere. That is a real issue because unless the power exists—it did, but the Government took it away—to insist on local authorities conforming to some credible plan, the burden falls disproportionately on the good local authority to the advantage of others.

Kate Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the case that he is making. He may also wish to comment on reports from friends and families of Travellers that certain rogue landlords who control sites put legitimate Traveller and Gypsy families under pressure to leave the sites, as they believe they will get more economic value from the sites if they can bring new tenants into the properties.

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend tells me something that I did not know and I am grateful because that should form part of the Government’s thinking.
Let me be clear: I do not countenance antisocial or illegal behaviour. Why would I, any more than anyone else? We are probably talking about 1,400 caravans that cause the problems. The Minister should not be too casual about his belief that powers exist. Sections 61 and 62 as operated by the police are not adequate because—not wrongly—they include a provision that the police have to ensure that there is a suitable, well-managed site to move Travellers to. That is a sensible provision, but it works only if such sites are available. We come back around, on this circular problem, that we can have all the powers we want but if the sites are not available, they will simply go round and round.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend makes the salient point that since 2010 the Government have systematically removed both the carrot and the stick for local authorities to provide appropriate sites. Then they are puzzled by the increase in unlawful, unauthorised encampments. Is not the solution to provide sites? It is a very limited role for local authorities when broken down in that way, and then the problem would go away of its own accord.

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend invites one of my conclusions and I will come on to exactly that point.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Does the shadow Minister not accept that the problem with requiring the provision of authorised sites is that a county cannot accept unlimited liability for those sites just because it happens to be a popular place for Travellers to visit? Most local authorities have provided a reasonable number of sites, but demand exceeds supply. It cannot be down to the taxpayer to meet that demand no matter what.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman is not right: many local authorities are not providing any sites and we need to establish that fact. If there are no sites, we will simply move people from one illegal, antisocial encampment to another, however much we operate the revolving door. That achieves nothing, and is neither rational nor fair to the communities who bear the burden of those illegal visitations.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to include the boating community in the travelling community? Members of the boating community do not want to be moved around, but under the current provisions that is what is happening. It is important, when talking about the travelling community, that we also include the boating community, which is increasing.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point, and I am aware that the owners of berths are beginning to make moves against their existing tenants, which is not acceptable. If she will forgive me, the world of narrowboats and house boats is a very different one to that of Travellers, but she may have a chance to expand on her point later.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Lloyd: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will make some progress. It is only fair.

The other point I make to the Minister about the law is the disparity between private land and public land. Normally, on private land it is possible to obtain action by bailiffs within 24 hours. With public land, that is rarely possible. Local authorities need to be under a duty to exercise a test of reasonableness, but within that it should be possible to align the actions that local authorities can take with respect to public land. Public land does not only belong to wicked councils, but may be owned by hospitals or schools. One of my hon. Friends was telling me about an incursion on to some playing fields in his constituency. It can take days and days to get any action on such incursions, and we need to look at the broad definition and bring public land into the realm of private land.

In Leeds, negotiated settlements have begun to take place. Encampments were costing some £10,000 each in local authority and policing costs. By negotiating with Travellers on stopping sites, the council has been able to establish better processes for, for example, the dumping of rubbish and the times of coming and going to the site. That has led to a significant reduction in the number of encampments and a saving of some £200,000 for the local authority and the police. That is the kind of sensible action that we should encourage.

The Minister’s speech was fascinating, but it was empty of real commitment—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): What would you do?

Tony Lloyd: The Minister has been talking for large parts of my speech, so he does not know what I would do. I talked about the need for a change in the law—not a review of the law—[Interruption.] I would be delighted to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Marcus Jones: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned on several occasions that he would like to see a change in the law. Will he say how he would like to see the law changed?

Tony Lloyd: If the Minister had been listening, he would have known that I talked about bringing private land into conjunction with public land and about making sure that the police’s powers could be used more effectively. The police are frustrated. I talked about the problem of section 62 and the fact that at the moment the police have to have an alternative site.

The reality is that we have to couple the use of those powers with the investment in sites, which Conservative Members are reluctant to do. When the comment was made that Government cuts to local government had had a serious impact on the capacity to provide sites, it was met with a howl of derision from Conservative Members, who once again want to protect austerity except when it affects their constituents.

We need to see investment in sites. We need to know where the £60 million has gone from the affordable homes scheme. We need a Government who have a genuine commitment to reduce the level of discrimination in our society. I sympathise with hon. Members who face problems from antisocial and illegal behaviour by Travellers, and those should be dealt with, but—as I began by saying—the lot of many of the travelling communities is unacceptable. One Traveller says, “As a PhD student I have been treated as an oddity or as incompetent by my peers and professors.” Another
Mr Francois: I am just talking about Travellers who are not travelling. This is the point I am trying to make. It is sometimes a misnomer to call these people Travellers, because they are not actually travelling at all. They are merely seeking to exploit weaknesses in the planning system to try to develop properties where others cannot.

We have had exactly that problem at an area in my constituency called Hovefields in Wickford, where Travellers have attempted to do that, despite two High Court injunctions to the contrary. Travellers have recently laid many tonnes of hard core on land at Hovefields and have then sought to expand the existing area of their properties upon it. Local members of the settled community have been subject to harassment and intimidation when they have sought to protest to the council about those changes. I am sure the whole House condemns that behaviour. Basildon Council is continuing to pursue the matter through the courts, but, as the Minister will be more than well aware, the whole process of enforcement in relation to breaches of planning regulation can be very cumbersome indeed.

Andy Slaughter: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who I know has a big Traveller problem in Hammersmith.

Andy Slaughter: Interesting point. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Dale Farm. I had the opportunity to visit it twice with the late Rodney Bickerstaffe and the late Lord Avebury. I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman has ever been there to talk to the Traveller communities. I just want to be clear that he is not making a link between someone’s ethnicity and their ability to follow planning regulations.

Mr Francois: The point I am making is that I believe all people should be equal before the law. I shall go on to explain exactly why that should apply.

Basildon Council—I spoke many times to Tony Ball, who was in charge of clearing Dale Farm—is continuing to pursue the matter through the courts. However, as the Minister knows, that can take a very long time. It is deeply frustrating to some of my constituents that they are expected to respect planning law—for instance, if they wish to build an extension to their domestic property—yet it would appear that some Travellers sometimes take little notice of the planning regulations by which others are expected to abide. What we are asking—I reiterate the point—is that all people should be equal before the law; otherwise, how can we expect to uphold the current planning regime? I therefore ask the Minister to consider—as part of the consultation, which I warmly welcome—whether anything further can be done to strengthen the enforcement powers of local authorities against such deliberate breaches of planning regulations. We all know it goes on and we all know it has been going on for years. It is about time the Government did something to try to bring this practice to an end.

The second category, the travelling Travellers, are those who do move from place to place. Some—I say again, some—of these Travellers move across the country establishing temporary encampments, quite often on public land such as car parks, other parks and open spaces.
This has been a particular problem in Essex in recent years, including in my own constituency. As the Minister said, councils have the opportunity, working with the police, to serve so-called section 61 notices to move Travellers on, but very often that just results in them moving to another public open space where the whole rigmarole starts again. The current powers available to police and local authorities do not act as a deterrent to people who wish to break the law in this way.

I understand that Ministers are now considering whether changes need to be made, and I take tonight’s announcement of a consultation exercise as a very positive development. I believe we should now look across the Irish sea for a solution and adopt the Irish Government’s system of making such deliberate acts of trespass a criminal offence. In fact, the Irish system is one reason why so many Traveller families from Ireland now come to the United Kingdom. By making this change, I believe that we could provide a very real deterrent to those who seek to trespass quite deliberately on public land. To echo what was said from the Opposition Benches earlier, prevention would be better than cure. I have discussed this issue on a number of occasions with Roger Hirst, our very active police, crime and fire commissioner for Essex, and can tell the House that he is also firmly in favour of adopting the so-called Irish option.

In summary—I know many Members are keen to speak—I congratulate Ministers on securing this debate and on seeking to ascertain the will of the House on this important issue. In the debate, I think Ministers will hear calls from both sides of the Chamber for something further to be done to help to reduce the problems that some Travellers sometimes cause some communities. The time for action is now. I very much hope that Ministers will listen to the House and that following the consultation—they can take this speech as a submission to it—they will finally determine to adopt the Irish option and provide the real deterrent we have needed for so long.

7.28 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak from the Front Bench. I did not expect to do so, but my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) has been injured. I am sure I speak on behalf of the whole House when I wish her well and a safe return to this place. I am very grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate.

I would like to outline a bit of context and history, because those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it. The first anti-Gypsy Act was passed back in the 1500s. It allowed the Crown the power to remove Gypsies from England by any violent means necessary. In 1547, Gypsies were effectively enslaved. Edward VI instituted a law that branded Gypsies with the letter “v” on their front for a period of two years of enslavement. If they escaped, they were then enslaved for life. And of course the House does not need a lecture on what happened to the Gypsy and Romani communities during the Holocaust.

While researching this debate over the recess, I read the excellent book by Katharine Quarmby, “No Place to Call Home”, which I commend to the House. I would be more than happy to place a copy in the Library. I was struck by the account of the tragic murder of 15-year-old Johnny Delaney in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire. He died on 28 May 2013 after having his head kicked in. One of the murderers, jumping on his head with both feet, said it was okay because, “He’s only a Gypsy”. It is important, therefore, that we approach this debate with an understanding of the context and history.

As one would expect from a Scottish nationalist Member, I want to talk about some of the challenges from a Scottish angle. The 2011 census was the first to include the option of Gypsy or Traveller as an ethnic category, and in it 4,200 people in Scotland identified as white Gypsy Travellers, although the real number is estimated to be between 15,000 and 20,000 by those who have worked with the community. In my speech, which I will keep brief because a lot of Members want to contribute, I will talk about education, health, housing, discrimination and hate crime and the media. I was disappointed that the Minister spent 20 minutes talking about enforcement, when there are clearly other issues facing the community.

On education, we know that Gypsy Travellers have some of the lowest attainment rates in Scotland: 28.1% leave school with no qualifications at SCQF level 3 or higher, compared with 1.9% among all leavers. The Scottish Traveller Education Review Group has developed guidance that went out to consultation, and the Scottish Government are currently considering the responses. I hope that the report can be implemented soon.

I want to touch on health because, as the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) outlined, some of the community’s health indicators are very poor: life expectancy is 10 years lower; and mothers within the community are 20 times more likely to have experienced the death of a child. That is a staggering figure and one that the House should reflect upon. There is a lack of cultural awareness and understanding among medical professionals, so it is important that the Royal College of General Practitioners is developing a toolkit on commissioning for socially excluded families. I hope that that can be developed further.

Much of this debate has centred on housing. Only seven of Scotland’s 32 local authorities do not provide a council site for Gypsy Travellers, including my own in the city of Glasgow, which closed its last council camp in 2009 because of a lack of demand. Scottish councils provide approximately 500 pitches across 32 sites. The sizes vary from fewer than 10 pitches to up to 30, and I am glad to see that guidance has been issued to local authorities to find some way of allowing these people to stay in traditional safe communities.

The House is more than aware that Gypsy Travellers want to live on private sites, which can help to support their independence, self-sufficiency and security, because too often they face difficulties with the planning system. It is incumbent on us as politicians to work with them, but I am afraid that some of the tone in this debate so far seems to suggest that we are working against them and that we see them as the opposition. Considering the context and the history I just outlined, that is deeply worrying.

I want to touch on discrimination and hate crime. Media coverage, in particular, is overwhelmingly negative. An Amnesty-commissioned report in 2012 considered the media treatment of Scottish Gypsy Travellers. It stated:

“Amnesty...is concerned at the wealth of evidence showing discrimination against Scottish Gypsy Travellers and the hostility and divisions between Scottish Gypsy Traveller and settled communities.”
It considered several studies and 190 media articles over a four-month period: 48%—nearly half—painted a negative picture of the Gypsy Traveller community, while only 28%—less than a third—were positive. The most shocking figure, however, was that only 6% presented a community voice, so only on very few occasions was the community given the right to reply. I do not think we would accept that in any other walk of life, but somehow in the media it seems to be acceptable.

It is incumbent on politicians and the media to be careful with their language. I was disappointed over the summer recess, therefore, when the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), during an interview—a fairly quick-fire interview, I do accept—said that if he were Prime Minister for one day his priority would be tougher enforcement on Gypsies and Travellers because they were a blight on our communities. Amnesty was right to call it inflammatory language.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) rose—

Douglas Ross: First, I want to clarify this point for the official record: I did not say: “because they are a blight on our communities”. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on the words he has added. I also said, many times afterwards, that this issue affects my constituents and constituents across the whole UK, and in many cases it is people in the settled communities who feel ignored because their voice is never heard in these debates.

David Linden: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to reopen this issue. [Interruption.] Will the House calm down for a minute? His apology on Radio Scotland was welcome, but he is on the record as saying before that they are a blight on local communities, which is deeply regrettable. I am glad that he has apologised.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has now said twice that I said on the record that travelling communities are a blight on their areas. I did not say that, as I mentioned in my intervention on him. Can you do something to stop him telling these untruths?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I think you have just done it yourself. I think you just corrected the record. We need not worry.

David Linden: I am sad that the debate has descended to this level. If the hon. Gentleman is not happy, I am sure his constituents will be more than happy to Google it.

It is important that we as legislators moderate our language. Some Conservative Members would do well to do that. Gypsy Travellers have suffered enough discrimination, so it is important that we come together, understand our differences and learn from history. The inclusion of a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month would be a very good way of reflecting on that, so I support that idea, but I return to my original point: those of us who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to Sir Paul Beresford, with a five-minute limit.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): That is discrimination, Mr Deputy Speaker! I will have to talk extremely quickly.

I thank the Minister for offering us this consultation and for expanding it to take in ideas and solutions. Surrey, and Mole Valley in particular, has had considerable and unpleasant experience of Travellers. Most are not Romani Gypsies. Most have very strong Irish accents. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) might have given us an explanation of why. For simplicity, I divide them into three groups—he divided them into two—the first being those who use legitimate sites. They are law-abiding. They utilise the education service; they go to schools. They use the national health service. They are part of our community.

The second group are those who buy land on the green belt, squat on it, bring community disharmony and exhibit aggressive abuse of the planning system, acting as if, while it applies to the settled community, they are above it. I have two particularly notorious sites in the Mole Valley. Both are on green belt and both groups abuse the planning system by making retrospective applications. We then get appeal, generally at the last minute, followed by reappplication, followed by rejection, followed by re-application, followed by refusal, followed by appeal, and so on. Both groups blatantly use the presence of children as reasons to reject the legal orders obtained by local authorities for their removal from the sites.

Relationships with local communities are fractious at best and often punctuated with verbal threats and threats to the surrounding communities. I have received a few myself. One site is on inherited land. The other was bought with cash, from whatever source. At the weekend, people arrived with caravans, trucks, bulldozers, loads of rubble, piping, electrical wiring and so on. By the end of Sunday, they had installed an electricity supply and tapped into a water supply, whether legally or not. Electric gates on pillars suitable for a garish stately home were put in. Then the nonsense started: hopeless applications, refusals, appeals, more refusals, more appeals. In the case of the gates, this has been continuing for 14 years, and looks set to continue for several more at least. We now have a review, and I ask the Minister to look at that case in particular. I would be delighted to come along and explain to him the difficulties.

The third group consists of the true Travellers on whom we have been concentrating this evening, who are an expensive menace to my local authorities, parish councils and farmers. This year Surrey has been particularly plagued by groups who descend on open land that contains community grounds, school grounds, farmland and so on. Fortunately—I am a member of the National Farmers Union—the farming community is becoming quite adept at prevention.
Those groups have been taking anything between one and 30 caravans, plus associated vehicles. They descend on the site and squat. Civil action to remove them can take between days and weeks, and is very expensive, especially for some of Surrey’s little parish councils.

When they have eventually been removed by expensive bailiffs, the sites are generally disgusting, featuring everything from food waste to children’s soiled nappies and worse. Returning them to a decent condition involves added expense.

As I have said, I should be delighted to visit the Minister, with one or two of the helpers who have to deal with all this, to advise him on how we feel that the law should be changed. I am particularly in favour of the change in the law suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who proposed that we should adopt the Irish example. We should extend it by not only making this a criminal offence, but giving the police the power to require the people whom they approach on the sites to prove who they are. The biggest problems for the police at present are the giving of “Mickey Mouse” names and the fact that enforcement is extremely difficult. I should love to come and see the Minister—and he is faintly nodding, so I will take that as a yes.

7.41 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall breach the normal partisan rules of the House and say that the Minister of State made what I thought was an excellent speech, in which he balanced the humanity that should inform us all with the frustration and annoyance that affect so many of our constituents. I felt that he spoke very well indeed, and that his words were matched by those of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd).

May I home in on what we are actually talking about this evening? We are discussing Gypsies and Travellers and the impact on local communities. I think we have accepted that 76% of the people who identified themselves in the census as members of the travelling community are in fact resident, but it is other people about whom we are talking. I will not stigmatise them by saying that they are of a particular ethnicity or origin, or that one can tell where they come from by their accents, because I do not like that. Everyone in the Chamber knows what we are talking about here. Let us talk about the people who are having an impact on our constituents, because they are the people who have chosen to live outside the law. To live outside the law you must be honest, and the problem is that people who are living outside the law are causing great distress and great pain.

It breaks my heart that many of us who are of Irish origin or have Irish backgrounds feel that, in many respects, we are stigmatised by the association with Irish Travellers, when the truth is much more than that. Ealing does not contain verdant fields and great open spaces where the lowing herd winds slowly o’er the lea and the plowman homeward plods his weary way, but we experience regular incursions by Travellers.

Matt Western: In contrast, we have a lot of greenery around us in Warwick and Leamington, and the summer saw a significant rise in the number of communities setting themselves up in the constituency. The authorities are under huge pressure, and I really feel for them, because they are hamstrung by the planning laws as they stand. They are also not aided—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman must sit down. This is an intervention, and interventions are meant to be very short. A great many Members wish to speak, so I cannot allow people to make speeches in the form of interventions.

Stephen Pound: I take the point made by my hon. Friend. I think that many of us feel the same irritation.

As I was saying, Ealing is not blessed with huge open spaces, but the open spaces that we have tend to be public parks, school playing fields, sports fields and golf courses, every one of which has suffered from a Traveller incursion in the last few years. It is not as if Ealing is one of the boroughs that say, “We will have no Travellers.” It is not a borough that sets its face against people who have every right to identify themselves as having a certain ethnicity. We have a caravan site. Every time there is an unauthorised encampment in the borough, we investigate the status of the children to establish whether they are receiving education and what their health conditions are. We do not try to shove people off without a second thought. Nevertheless, between 2012 and this summer there have been 140 illegal occupations in the London borough of Ealing, the majority of which have been on council land.

I have had interactions with the travelling community since the mid-1970s, as a housing officer, as a housing association officer, as a councillor, and even as a mayor and a Member of Parliament. I entirely accept that there are some who will approach you when they move on to the land and say, “I am the guy in charge: if you have any problems, come and see me.” Others, however, will commit the most ghastly antisocial behaviour, such as throwing stones at cars, and a couple of weeks ago there were some horses at a petrol station on the A40. That is cruelty to the horses, but it is also pretty appalling for the people who live in the area.

There are some who take things too far in the wrong direction, and worst of all are those who use the encampment for fly-tipping. There is no more heart-breaking sight than a sports field where a group of amateur footballers have been trying to get together to play football—to bring people together for the good of the community—and there is a 2-metre-deep pile of asbestos-ridden household waste that costs us a fortune to clear up. Let me give the House a rough idea of what that means. The legal costs alone in the London borough of Ealing between June 2016 and the present time were more than £200,000, and officer time amounted to more than £30,000. Our borough is not swimming in cash. I doubt that any Member in the Chamber represents a constituency that has more money than it knows what to do with, but our clear-up costs amounted to £250,000.

These are not really encampments. They are, in fact, illegal businesses. I pay tribute to Ealing council officers such as Yasmim Basterfield, Chris Bunting, Jess Murray and Paul Murphy—not the other Paul Murphy, the one in Ealing—who do an incredible amount of work with their teams. However, we do not have the confidence of the local community that we can sufficiently address this issue. What happens is that, suddenly, a great glistening cavalcade of chromium-plated 4x4s—if only
it were a caravanserai!—roars down and sets up an encampment on our open space, and then the problems start.

In the brief time that remains to me, I shall ask the Minister four basic questions, to which I want to hear four answers. Section 61 has been mentioned, and section 61 is not good enough. It needs to be enforced properly. What guidance will the Minister give his right hon. Friend the Home Secretary about a protocol to enforce it? Why cannot legal advisers in magistrates courts sign the warrants over the weekend? Will the Minister at least speak to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who is present, to establish whether the Ministry of Justice can do something about that? Every vehicle that arrives can be identified through a registration number. Why can those numbers not be used to identify the people who are responsible for the crime, and then prosecute them? What could possibly be wrong with that?

Finally, could we have a few bob from the Government for the unanticipated costs of clearing up? Frankly, it is crippling us in the London borough of Ealing.

7.47 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Throughout August this year, I was contacted by a large number of constituents who were concerned about the illegal encampment of Travellers. Travellers had broken into and occupied parkland near Stoke Gifford in my constituency, and then—having been successfully evicted from there—occupied another site in nearby Patchway.

Having considered the issue in some depth over the summer, I believe that there are failings in three key areas: provision of pitches and transit sites, enforcement and oversight. I shall deal with the last of those first, because I am convinced that the current lack of oversight is the root cause of many of the problems exemplified by the issue in my constituency.

Three separate Government Departments—the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice—have a stake in the problem of illegal encampments and the powers to prevent and remove them. Those powers themselves are then split between councils, as a planning issue, and the police, as a matter of trespass and public order. At least five public bodies are therefore connected with the situation in some way. Of course I applaud sensible and practical localism, but central Government must not abrogate their duty to assist local authorities.

In an immediate response to the incidents in my constituency, I submitted written questions to two of the Departments involved. I feel that the responses of both Departments underline the current belief of central Government that illegal encampments are purely a local issue. The Home Office, quite properly, restated that “the decision on when and whether to use police powers is an independent operational decision for the police.”

While it is not up to the Home Secretary to directly command the police operationally, I am sure that my constituents will be concerned to learn that no national guidance is available to chief constables about the circumstances in which it is appropriate to use their existing powers to remove illegal encampments.

Similarly, the Department for Communities and Local Government confirmed:

“The Government has made no estimates” of transit sites for Travellers, as these are a planning responsibility for local authorities. Again, that is strictly correct, but is it sensible Government policy to perform no central planning or analysis of how local authorities are performing in their responsibility to provide transit sites?

There is evidence in these responses of a total lack of oversight of or concern about the problem from central Government. My constituents will no doubt be baffled to learn that a problem as mobile as illegal Traveller encampments is not monitored at a central level but considered a purely local issue. If we are to resolve the other problems that my constituents’ experience has revealed, we must begin with the Government taking a greater leadership role in tackling these problems.

The current legislation on illegal encampments dates back to 1994—the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act—and, as I have outlined, there is no real way for any of the Departments concerned to be sure that the current arrangements are working for our constituents, and nor does there appear to be effective guidance to police forces on the circumstances in which it is appropriate to use their powers. The result is not sensible localism, but a postcode lottery. Section 61 of the 1994 Act is clear that should any damage to property or land occur, the police are empowered to compel trespassers to vacate land that they have already been asked to leave. That did not occur in either Stoke Gifford or Patchway, and it was left to the council to undertake enforcement action through the courts.

The police have existing powers to enforce the law. For example, a very senior councillor with public service spanning five decades—30 years as a police officer and almost 20 years as a councillor—Councillor Brian Allinson, who is also a very good friend of mine, informed me that a fellow councillor suffered some pretty horrific abuse and threats. As a former police officer, Councillor Allinson was shocked that there seemed to be no follow-up or further action by the police. He pointed out that, when he served in the police force, that would have been considered a serious threat against the person and tackled with the due consideration it merited. I am still waiting to meet the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner to discuss the full circumstances of the incidents, but the police, with Home Office guidance, must be properly prepared to enforce the law to deal with illegal encampments where crime and disorder has taken place.

As has already been said, prevention is better than cure. I am pleased that South Gloucestershire Council recognises in its local plan that “the presence of a transit site...can speed up enforcement action” However, the same plan also notes that the site must be within the same local authority area as the land affected for the police to gain extra powers.

Again, it is clear that this is not just a local problem; there is a lack of central Government help and a lack of effective legislation. I urge South Gloucestershire Council to re-examine the need against the backdrop of these recent incidents, but the first move must come from the Departments in ensuring that the police are enforcing the law of the land without fear or favour.
Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) sought to leave the Minister with two impressions: one was a series of four questions—we all look forward to the answers—and the other was a compliment on his speech. I am afraid that I cannot agree with my hon. Friend, because I thought the speech lacked any ministerial intent to do anything about this problem.

The problem is increasing across the country, particularly in the west midlands and certainly in Coventry, which I have represented for a few years now. Over the past five years, the number of illegal encampments—I stress that I am talking only about the illegal encampments—has doubled. We are facing an irritant that is causing real problems and that, in the end, will breed exactly the sort of prejudice, bias and racial discrimination that the previous Labour Government sought to prevent through legislation, which I approved of. The simple fact is that the problem is coming back and it is corrosive, and the whole Gypsy and Traveller community is being affected as a result, which is totally wrong because we are talking about a small percentage, but the illegal occupation of these encampments is increasing.

The Government’s response leaves a lot to be desired. When we look at what they have done, we see that the previous Secretary of State, under the coalition Government, was convicted in the High Court for racial discrimination. We have seen the Government remove from local authorities the statutory obligation to at least carry out a census of the arrangements in place for sites in their areas. It is a pattern of disengagement from the problem, which we all face. It is not just the large metropolitan areas, such as the west midlands, because we have heard Conservative Members refer to county councils across the country making representations.

I say this to the Minister: for goodness’ sake, show some ministerial authority, concern and drive to sort this problem out. What have we had instead? We have had a promise that there will be a consultation. Nobody could be against consultation—we can even warmly welcome it, as the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) did. He said that it was the greatest thing he had ever heard, and the next minute he said that the time for action is now. Well, the time for action has been kicked into the long grass. The Minister does not need a consultation to answer the four questions. He does not have the answers, but he could find them. That is what I urge him to do tonight, and this is the brunt of what I want to say.

Stephen Pound: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Robinson: No, my hon. Friend has had a good go already and other Members wish to speak. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Podcock) wants to contribute, for example.

The Minister has had an offer—it is unprecedented, in my experience—from the West Midlands police and crime commissioner to get into a dialogue about specifics, because we need action or legislation from the Government, not consultation. That, together with a bit of money here and there, could make a big difference—we can never solve this problem—in reducing the frequency and intensity of these encampments. That is what we are looking for: action, not words, though, yes, consultation will allow us all to play our part.

The Minister has offered us a meeting. If I was in his position, I would have asked for that meeting: “Come in and let’s see what we can do together.” We now speak as a combined authority in the west (Mrinds, as many hon. Friends will do this evening. We can offer the cross-county and cross-borough co-operation that the Minister is looking for, but we need a lead from the Government that they want action in this area, and a bit of money would make all the difference. For goodness’ sake, get going and, while the consultation is ongoing, devise a plan of action to implement the decisions afterwards. We have been waiting for the final draft of the guidance to local authorities for months, and the draft that was produced was virtually acceptable. Put an end to this drift and disengagement, get a grip and show yourself to be a Minister by doing something about it.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Not surprisingly, the calling of this debate has stimulated considerable interest in my constituency, from constituents, the local councils, the police and the media. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), this is a hot topic in south Essex. Indeed, in the run-up to the general election, I wrote to the Prime Minister’s policy adviser, asking that further measures be included in the forthcoming manifesto, because quite frankly the public are fed up. They are fed up that the same rules do not appear to apply equally to all members of society, whatever their cultural background. That is what we are talking about: illegal activity perpetrated in the main by Travellers. This is not about discrimination or attacking someone’s culture, way of life or traditions; this is about all of us playing by the same rules and abiding by the same law, having the law applied to us equitably and all taking responsibility for our actions in the same way.

I have a page here listing some horror stories of recent incidents, but unfortunately I do not have time to go through them. However, I want to thank the local councillors whom I have worked with over the past few years to tackle these issues. In particular, I want to thank Councillors Tony Ball and Phil Turner, both former leaders of Basildon Council, Rob Gledhill, the leader of Thurrock Council, and Gavin Callaghan, current chairman of Basildon’s policy and resources committee.

I accept that the travelling community faces many challenges, as described in the various briefings that have been circulating, and that no one should be subjected to hate speech or hate crime. Equally, however, it is reasonable that the settled community can expect the law to be applied evenly. As we have heard, following the clearance of Dale Farm, which was a success, unfortunately both Basildon and Thurrock Councils have been on the frontline in trying to tackle the seemingly endless unauthorised encampments. In south Essex, we have had some success, particularly in Thurrock, with the new conservative leader of Thurrock Council regularly seen at evictions, where the police were robustly enforcing section 61. Unfortunately, he tells me that that was last year; this year, there is greater reluctance to enforce section 61. One of the key reasons, he suggests, is that the guidance for the police has shifted emphasis from “or’s”—breaches of this, that “or” the other—to “and’s”. It is thus almost impossible to apply section 61, except
in the most extreme cases. He also highlights one of the key problems: when the legislation was drafted, it did not clarify how far an encampment would have to move. Ridiculously, we end up with encampments moving only a very short distance and the whole process starting again. That needs to be looked at—I want that distance to be measured not in metres, but in miles.

Finally, we need to change the guidance on criminality before and during these encampments. At present, perhaps rightly, collective responsibility for criminal damage—whether the cutting of padlocks or the removal of gates—cannot be applied as a group enters a site; for an offence, an individual and evidence need to be available. However, again, a simple change to the current legislation to amend the wording so that it says, “Where criminal damage has occurred and unauthorised persons have entered public land” would allow the police to act more quickly. In the same vein, we have to be realistic about what happens on these sites—the amount of environmental damage. We need to consider how we can hold the collective responsible for the clean-up, which often runs into many tens of thousands of pounds.

We have tried. We have worked with the current legislation, engaged with the Essex Countywide Traveller Unit and used the courts, but frankly that is not working. I accept that the law is blind, but the public are not—they want action and they want it now. All I am trying to do is level the playing field. We need only a few tweaks to existing legislation but a change in the law as identified by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford.

Calling for Ministers to adopt the so-called Irish option of criminalising deliberate acts of trespass such as those that we see frequently in south Essex is a sensible move and it has my 100% backing. I do not believe that it criminalises a way of life or is discriminatory; it criminalises an activity—unauthorised encampments and trespass. I look forward very much to hearing the Minister’s views on tweaks and changes to the law.

8.2 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I want to make a few points about illegal Traveller encampments and the impact they have on constituencies such as mine.

I should say at the outset that I do not accuse the whole Traveller community of taking part in illegal encampments or in pitching caravans where they should not; I am sure that many do not do that and are frustrated with the reputational damage done when it happens. But that does happen, and it causes significant anger and frustration in the community when it does. In my constituency, illegal encampments are regularly set up on common land, waste ground, car parks and even public parks. The Travellers move on to a site. If they do not move when requested, the council can apply for a court order, which typically takes one to two weeks and also, of course, incurs legal costs for the local authority. When the Travellers eventually move on, there are usually significant clean-up costs.

Wolverhampton City Council tells me that it has to go through this process 10 to 20 times a year. Adding legal costs and clean-up costs together, it says that it typically costs £10,000 to £15,000 a time to deal with an illegal encampment—that is 10 to 20 times a year in just one local authority. There was recently an illegal encampment in land off Prouds Lane in Bilston in my constituency. In May this year, the small fence protecting the land was driven through for the caravans to get on; there were upwards of a dozen caravans there. Residents were understandably angry at this trespass on to the land. The council applied for the court order. When the Travellers eventually went after about 10 days, they left huge piles of rubbish around the site. The council moved very quickly to clear the rubbish, and I commend it for its swift and effective action. Although the council moved as quickly and effectively as it could, afterwards my constituents asked questions about the legal costs involved and why local council tax payers should have to pay them.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the costs are for not only local councils but many private residents and landowners, who have to spend their own money to clean up and deal with the issue of illegal encampments? One of my constituents has written to me about spending £3,000 a week on the problem.

Mr McFadden: The hon. Lady makes a good point: the costs are often private as well as public.

My constituents also asked about the costs of the clean-up and, again, why local council tax payers should have to pay them. They asked what could be done to secure the site from a repeat of the experience and who would pay for that.

When the Travellers eventually moved from Prouds Lane, they went to East Park—I mean right in the middle of the public park in the East Park area. My constituents watched their public asset being abused by an illegal encampment. That pattern repeats itself over and again in many parts of the black country and, as we have heard, many other parts of the country, too. As we speak, another illegal encampment has been set up on the Bilston Urban Village site in my constituency. The council is wearyly going through the same legal process of trying to get it removed.

Given the repeated pattern of what is happening, it is clear that the current system is not working properly: it is too cumbersome, it takes too long and it is too costly. I would like the Minister to consider two questions. I welcome the consultation, but it cannot just be about current powers. First, will it address what legal changes can be made to give councils and the police the power to move these encampments much more quickly than at present?

Secondly, what more can be done to ensure that those responsible for the clean-up bill actually pay it, rather than it being left to local residents to pay? We should remember that the costs involved are not only the legal and clean-up costs, but the ongoing costs—for example, of taking preventive measures such as the installation of bollards and fences all around the black country. Local residents will argue, with some justification, that if they parked their car in the wrong place, they would be fined, and that if they did not pay the fine, it would escalate along with the legal process. Yet that does not seem to happen in these cases.

The law dealing with these matters is not fit for purpose. It takes too long and imposes costs on the law-abiding public, not those who have broken the law. There appears to be little or no disincentive to setting up illegal encampments. Those who do so know that there will be a delay before the council gets its court order and they are rarely forced to pay for the costs arising from their dumped rubbish. The law gives them no incentive to stop the behaviour.

Allowing the situation to continue is resulting in costs piling up for local authorities and local taxpayers. It also corrodes public trust in law enforcement. Most importantly, it is not working because the pattern of illegal encampments is continuing. Although we do not have a vote on a substantive motion tonight, I hope the Minister does not just listen and forget what has been said. I hope the Government will come forward soon with proposals to strengthen the law to make enforcement faster and easier for councils and the police.

8.8 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), with whom I very much agree. I am delighted that we have time this evening for this important debate, and I thank Sedgemoor and Mendip District Councils and Somerset County Council for the enthusiasm with which they provided me with information for my contribution. That tells us something about how important this is for my constituents, who have been angered again and again by illegal encampments.

In the past two years, there have been illegal encampments in Berrow, Street and routinely in the car parks and sports club of Burnham-on-Sea. There have been illegal encampments in Shepton Mallet and Brean as well as the more “permanent” Traveller sites with dubious planning status at Pilton, Theale, Cross and Wick—and, until recently, Rodney Stoke.

There is a sense that there is one rule for the travelling community and one rule for everyone else. I want to share some quick examples of illegal encampments with the House, to draw out some points about their cost and the frustration of local communities and councils.

In June, just before the Glastonbury festival, there was an illegal encampment near the festival site in Shepton Mallet. Mendip District Council moved as quickly as it could to initiate legal proceedings, but it still took 10 days, and even then, when the Travellers were being escorted out of the town, they tried to break into the local park to reoccupy that instead. The cost to the Travellers of their time in the town was absolutely nothing. The cost to Mendip District Council was £27,745, and that does not include the policing costs of trying to escort them out of the town at the end of that illegal encampment.

In Burnham-on-Sea, at the Pier Street car park, the Travellers know exactly how long they can stay. They come back again and again—often it is different groups of Travellers—and every time Sedgemoor District Council has to initiate the legal process, at a cost of £355, plus the cost of staff and solicitors’ fees. To make things fair, when the Travellers are in the car park, the council suspends car parking charges for everybody else. That is great for those shopping in the town, but it means lost revenue for the council.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): That did not happen in my constituency, where we had the farce of people parking in the car park and receiving fines—these were the legal motorists—which I then had to get overturned by the council. That again emphasises that there is one rule for one and another rule for another.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Indeed, that was exactly what happened when we had the very first occupation in Burnham-on-Sea. Traffic wardens were giving tickets to those who had parked legally but overrun, while the Travellers were allowed to be there without penalty. We are talking about the main tourist car park for what is—I can say this now that my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) has left the Chamber—Somerset’s premier seaside resort. The presence of an illegal encampment in that car park—especially one right next door to the coach park, which is an important part of our town’s business—creates entirely the wrong first impression, may well lose us business and certainly costs local businesses nearby, and that is without mentioning the clean-up costs that the local council incurs as well.

In the nearby village of Berrow, there was a Traveller encampment on the village green. Given the mess that the green was left in afterwards, Berrow chose as a village to spend quite a large proportion of its annual precept on building a bund all the way around the green. I question whether money that is hard earned by parish councils should be spent on preventing illegal activity rather than on more positive improvements for the community altogether.

I should also mention that there have routinely been encampments on private land up in Brean, a popular tourism destination, which means that businesses that contribute enormously to our local economy are left holding the baby and are responsible for bringing in the bailiffs and moving those Travellers on. Additionally, Somerset County Council has told me that in the last three years it has spent nearly £25,000 on moving Travellers on from the public highway and a further £6,000 on the clean-up costs afterwards. At every turn, there is an asymmetric cost—a cost to councils, Avon and Somerset police, local businesses and the community, but no cost whatsoever to the Travellers who have made the illegal encampment.

The argument is that illegal encampments are an issue only if there is inadequate provision of authorised sites, but there are 64 authorised pitches in Somerset. In Bath and North East Somerset and in North Somerset, the two adjoining local authorities, there are a further 50, so there are 114 pitches available in the county of Somerset. How many can the taxpayer be expected to provide? We live in a beautiful part of the world, with a good local economy, but surely our liability for Travellers cannot be unlimited or set simply by Traveller demand. We must be willing to say what is a fair provision for councils to offer. We must reduce costs to local authorities or find a way to pass them on to the Travellers who are illegally encamped.

We must ensure that the process is quicker, so that we end this cat-and-mouse game, whereby the Travellers understand exactly how long they can stay, stay for exactly that long and then move on before they incur any cost, while the council has incurred all the cost in the process. The Irish option, which a number of colleagues...
I accept, as I said at the outset, that it is a minority of the travelling community who cause problems, and I am sure that it is just as frustrating for the majority. However, it is my job to speak up on behalf of residents in Dudley who have been affected by these camps. What my constituents have had to put up with this summer, as in previous years, is completely and utterly unacceptable, and they and I want tougher and swifter action to deal with them.

8.18 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who is a fellow west midlands MP. Indeed, there seems to be a strong west midlands-Warwickshire theme running through this debate, and I am delighted that the Minister responding is a west midlands Member of Parliament and will understand the issues.

We have seen plenty of those issues in my constituency of Rugby, particularly on eastern side, close to the urban area of Coventry. One of the reasons why the problem occurs is that the market for those in the travelling community is based in that urban community. They are not often able to settle in the urban community and are on the urban fringe. One of the issues in Warwickshire is that we have been able to provide enough Traveller pitches. Very often, therefore, when an encampment is moved on, the authority has been able to demonstrate sufficient provision.

We have had incidents where pitches do exist but the group of Travellers being moved on are not willing to go on to vacant pitches because they are not able to get on with those already occupying the site. That certainly seems to be one problem. We have had great support from our police and crime commissioner in Warwickshire, Philip Seccombe, who has recently implemented new protocols, building on the work being done in the west midlands.

I want to focus on abuses of the planning system, making reference to three examples. The first relates to the number of encampments set up on the Friday before a bank holiday, with the travelling community knowing that the enforcement officer will not be at work on the Monday and so they have a longer period in which to get these developments done and entrenched. In my area, they have often done this on a site straddling two local authorities, creating issues of ownership and who the lead authority to deal with the situation would be.

The second example relates to what happens when sites are then approved, often on a temporary consent. In Barnacle, in my constituency, a number of subsequent temporary consents have been given; temporary consents of two years have been given on three or four occasions. Each time that happens, the settled community believes that the site is becoming more permanent and it has concerns.

The third thing I wish to draw attention to is the manipulation of protections within the green belt. The national planning policy framework defines previously developed land, with a presumption in favour of development, as land on which there was previously a permanent structure, but that presumption does not apply where land is occupied by an agricultural or forestry building. That exemption does not apply in respect of an equestrian building, and a number of instances that have taken place around the village of Wolvey in my constituency have been drawn to my

[James Heappey]
attention by Councillor Adrian Warwick of Warwickshire County Council and Councillor Chris Pacey-Day of Rugby Borough Council. In these examples, a number of equestrian buildings have been built, with double glazing and insulation, and have been used as stables for a period of time, but with the clear intention that at some future point an application for a residence might be made. Such applications have been made, with Rugby Borough Council, as the local authority, turning one down only for it to be granted by the Planning Inspectorate. The planning officers at the borough council have drawn my attention to this loophole, telling me that it could easily be dealt with by adding the word “equestrian” to the appropriate annex to the NPPF. I ask the Minister whether he and his officials might look at that loophole and exemption, to circumvent the approach that is being made by a number of people. I am not suggesting that these applications are always made by people from the Gypsy and Traveller community, but they are being made in those areas where there are substantial incursions into the green belt by Gypsy and Traveller sites. I hope that the Minister will examine that issue.

I take the point made by many hon. Members that at the heart of this debate is a concept of fairness and a belief, often held rightly, that some members of the travelling community are able to take advantage of and subvert planning rules that govern the remainder of us. We therefore need a tightening of planning controls so that we do not get so many retrospective applications, we do not end up with a surfeit of multiple temporary consents and we do not have the abuse of the building of stables on land in the green belt.

8.23 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): As a Labour MP, it is rare that I find myself in agreement with the Prime Minister, but last year, in her first speech upon taking office, she talked of the need to tackle burning injustices, and when I was elected in June I made a pledge to my constituents that I would work to tackle inequalities and injustices in our society. Healthcare occupies a special place in our country, but universal care cannot simply adopt a universal approach. In our communities, it is often the case that those with the greatest health needs are those least likely to access NHS services. Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are more than twice as likely as others to suffer from a long-term health condition, their infant mortality rates are high and, most worryingly, the suicide rate among Irish Travellers is six times higher than that of the wider population.

The GRT communities have unique and significant healthcare needs, and our NHS services should be intelligent and flexible enough to meet their needs. However, research published last month by the Traveller Movement highlighted the difficulties many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities face when accessing healthcare. In this place, Members often speak out against the unfairness of postcode lotteries, but rarely do we speak of the injustices faced by those who have no postcode at all. NHS guidance states that being unable to provide proof of address should not be a barrier to accessing health services, yet far too many Travellers find themselves unable to register with a GP or access other local health services. Without access to GP services, families are unable to access even the most basic treatments of the NHS; we could be talking about a mother being unable to access adequate antenatal care, young parents struggling to obtain vaccinations for their children, someone in a mental health crisis or older generations being left without the medication they need to manage their long-term conditions. This denial of access to NHS services simply is not good enough, and the Government must work with NHS England to communicate more clearly to frontline healthcare providers that they cannot refuse to register GRT people for “no fixed abode”.

Decisions taken about healthcare are strongest and most effective when they are based on medical evidence and data. NHS England still does not include Gypsies, Roma and Travellers as a defined ethnic group in its data collection, but I welcome the Minister’s comments in this debate that that is being explored. Inclusion in NHS data collection could be the start of a transformation in healthcare for GRT communities. Not only would it enable national comparisons to be made, but it could improve local authorities’ understanding of these groups and enable much better representation of GRT needs in their joint strategic needs assessments. That is the first step in starting to address these stark health inequalities.

Recording data will be a welcome step forward, but recording alone will not be enough. Improving information sharing across the NHS and among other public services is key to improving access for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, especially given their complex health needs and high levels of mobility. This is not about singling out Travellers, or even isolating them, by creating dedicated services—that is not what GRT communities want. All they ask is for the same access to the high-quality NHS services we have all come to expect and that everyone deserves.

The Government talk a good game on tackling burning injustices, but to say that their actions were lukewarm at best would still be generous. They may have their own community and cultural identity, but Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are as much a part of our wider community and society as anyone else, and that needs to be recognised. Instead of demonising, ostracising and alienating Travellers, the Government should be engaging with the communities to better integrate them into society and public services.

I want to live in a society in which differences in culture, belief and tradition are accepted. Our diversity gives us strength. I do not want to live in a society in which differences in health outcomes are tolerated. The health inequalities faced by GRT communities need to be measured, analysed and tackled head-on to remove the injustice of early deaths and needless illness and disability. Let us hope that this debate shows us in our best light: as champions of diversity and warriors against unfairness.

8.28 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Having represented Moray as a councillor and Member of the Scottish Parliament, and now as an MP, I have dealt with Gypsy Travellers and their integration with the settled community on many occasions. That is why, during the quick-fire interview with Core Politics TV mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), in between questions about my favourite karaoke song and what I would discuss with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) were stuck in a lift together, I mentioned that, if I was Prime Minister for the day, there should be tougher enforcement against Gypsy Travellers. I shall explain my choice of words...
later in my speech, but illegal and unauthorised Gypsy Traveller encampments in Moray were a problem when I made that comment in June, they were a problem when the interview was aired in August, and they remain a problem as we debate this issue tonight.

There are, of course, many other issues that would be priorities for any Prime Minister, and I have apologised for saying that enforcement against Gypsy Travellers would be my No. 1 priority, but I do not apologise for speaking up on behalf of the communities throughout Moray that have been affected by illegal and unauthorised encampments. I look forward to contributing to the Westminster Hall debate—secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—later this week to expand further on this discussion. It is clear to me that the formation of illegal and unauthorised encampments, and particularly how they are left by the travelling community, leads to much of the friction between the travelling community and the settled community.

Of course, the vast majority of Travellers go about their life in a respectful and friendly way. Sadly, as is the case with much of society, the actions of a minority create a bad impression of the entire community. That brings me back to the remarks I made in June. I called for tougher enforcement. The definition of enforcement is “the process of making sure that people obey something such as a law or rule”. I may not have been successful in getting my point across, but I was calling for action to be taken when illegal behaviour occurs or local rules are ignored—for exactly the same treatment as we would expect for people who are not Gypsy Travellers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman mentions enforcement; he will be aware of the TV programme “Can’t Pay? We’ll Take It Away!”, which shows that it is not just a matter of moving people off from wherever they are, because there are also court costs. Does he feel that those costs should not fall on the people? There should be a more urgent process to try to get the people off before all that happens.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. I agree with the hon. Gentleman and will address that issue later in my speech.

Historically, Moray has had an unusually high number of unauthorised encampments. Some suggest that that is because we have no official Travellers sites, yet in 2006, when there was a dedicated site, there were 132 unauthorised sites—one of the highest numbers recorded in the area. It is also important to consider why we no longer have an official halting site. The Chanonry site near Elgin was purpose-built for the travelling community, but ended up as a fortress of illegal activity. It was eventually raided by more than 100 officers from Grampian police in the biggest operation of its kind in Moray. Those arrested were sentenced to a combined 24 years’ imprisonment. I listened to what the Minister said about local authorities establishing sites, but it is not a simple task. Sites are clearly a problem for the local area: given the experiences at Chanonry in Elgin, the communities at Kingsmeadow near Forres and at Arradoul near Buckie, they were reluctant to have an official halting site in their area.

In response to the intervention by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) I would say that actions have consequences. As a result of the actions of Travellers on the Highlands and Islands Enterprise land near Forres, that public body was forced to pay £10,000 to clear up the mess. A site near the old airfield at Dallachy was littered with human waste and needles when the Travellers moved on. In many other parts of Moray, local people and businesses have been intimidated and threatened by the occupants of these sites.

We have heard a lot about fairness; I wish to comment on fairness for the settled community, who often feel not only that there is one rule for the travelling community and another for them, but that their view is ignored. I am a new Member, and I know how highly regarded the House of Commons Library is, but I was disappointed that its briefing for this debate on Gypsies and Travellers and local communities did not mention local communities once. It mentioned settled communities four times: there were three references to tension between the settled and travelling communities, and only one line that mentioned the impact of Traveller sites on the settled community. The fact that there was just one line in a 53-page briefing document will reinforce the feeling of many people in the settled community that their views are ignored.

I have been labelled a bigot and a racist for expressing the concerns of many of my constituents about this issue. Among all the criticism, though, I have also received a huge number of emails and letters from people from across Moray and, indeed, throughout the United Kingdom—people who wanted their concerns to be expressed and the issue to be debated. After all that, I hope that people will take some comfort from the strength of feeling shown by Members from all parties in this debate, and will no longer feel that their voice is ignored.

8.34 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, I am particularly pleased to contribute to this debate and to endorse the comments of colleagues who have pointed to the fact that Gypsies and Travellers are members of our local communities whether they travel, live in houses, or live in settled sites in caravans. The communities have a long history of a rich contribution to our cultural traditions, and an equally long history of suffering intolerance and abuse.

I wish to start by remembering Rodney Bickerstaffe, lost to us last week, who was known to many of my colleagues as a leading union figure and a champion of pensioner rights. He was also president of the Labour Party Campaign for Travellers’ Rights. In 2004, he wrote: “A litmus test of society’s commitment to fairness and equality is how it treats the most excluded. Current evidence suggests we are failing with regards to the Gypsy and Traveller community.”

It is extremely distressing that, today, we still know that Gypsies and Travellers continue to suffer what has been rightly described as the last respectable form of racism. I call that out when it is seen as coming from opinion leaders. Last year, in Amazon Prime’s “The Grand Tour” Jeremy Clarkson was found by Ofcom to have made comments that had the potential to be “insulting and offensive”, relying heavily on “offensive and stereotyped comparisons”, but the programme was broadcast none the less.
Recently, the Rooney family went on trial on charges relating to modern slavery. In response to defence claims that all Travellers had workers operating under similar conditions, the judge commented:

“Sadly, I very much fear that you may be correct about that.”

I do not believe that the judge had any evidence for making such assertions. It is really important that people in public office do not make those kinds of claims in an unsupported way.

I wish to follow the example of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) who talked about disadvantage and inequalities in health outcomes by making some comments about educational outcomes. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) about the very poor educational outcomes suffered by young Gypsies and Travellers in the education system. We know, as he said, that they are much less likely to meet the GCSE threshold. Indeed, their performance is understated further by the fact that many do not even complete schooling beyond the age of 14. We know that they are more likely to be in special schools, more likely to be excluded, more likely to drop out of secondary education and 10 times less likely to go to university. The reasons for that include racist bullying.

Today, the Daily Mail reports the case of Ben Bennett, who was forced to change schools 11 times as a result of bullying and abuse.

There is a low level of aspiration for the community among teachers and the teaching professions—my hon. Friend rightly drew attention to that—and a lack of funding for Traveller education services, which helps schools to introduce policies to support the education of Gypsy and Traveller children. That scheme has now gone, and, as a result, schools feel unwelcoming to Gypsies and Travellers who are now more likely to be educated at home. There are problems with that as Ofsted is not required to check whether education is actually happening in the home setting, and will only visit if the parents request it.

I am not saying that we should remove that access to home education, because if we do that and do not address the structural discrimination in education it is more likely that these children will drop out of education altogether. What we need are positive policies to ensure that Gypsy and Traveller children thrive and do well in schools. There are very good examples of how that can be done effectively. For example, zero-tolerance bullying policies can be implemented. I urge the Government to work with the children’s commissioner and non-governmental organisations in looking at how such policies might be developed and introduced. The employment of members of staff from the community has been found to be very effective in schools that have a high concentration of Gypsy and Traveller children. It is important that the Government get their promised education advisory group up and running and that it includes members of the Gypsy and Traveller community.

Finally, it is also important to remove and reduce discrimination and discriminatory perceptions in wider society. We must do more to embed Gypsy and Traveller culture across all education settings. I endorse the calls this evening for the introduction into the curriculum of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month. If we can get things right in early settings in our schools, I am confident that Gypsy and Traveller children will do better and that our society will enjoy a greater sense of community cohesion with this long-standing part of our local community.
I am told that the cost of parks officers’ time to deal with Traveller issues this summer alone was in excess of £4,500. Many Traveller groups have a high understanding of the current legal processes and are able to use that knowledge to ensure that they can stay for as long as possible before moving on to another area. The council invests in preventive measures, blocking off car parks to high-sided vehicles with height barriers, having concrete road blocks and additional security personnel at car parks. That can be effective but it can also prevent legitimate users of the area.

I say to the Minister that there is no point in having a debate unless there is action. Obviously, colleagues and I welcome the fact that we are being invited to have input in the process, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford has the answer and I hope the Government will adopt his solution.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We still have a great number of speakers, as Members will see, so after the next speaker the time limit will be reduced to four minutes.

8.44 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) were right to remind us—as indeed did my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) from the Front Bench and others—about the importance of people’s right to live in the way they choose and about the alternative lifestyles that people have. That is a source of strength for our democracy, and those people are members of our local community, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South pointed out. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston was also right to point out to the inequality that exists in educational achievement, health and many other factors. I have reiterated those points in my own community, as I am sure other hon. Members have in theirs, in the face of comments on Facebook and elsewhere as a result of some of the illegal sites we have had. That is really important because, if it becomes a choice between supporting the right of people to live in the way they choose and, by objecting to criminal behaviour, not supporting that right, we will not get very far.

So let me start by saying that I support the right of people to live in the way they choose, and that is a source of strength for our democracy. But it cannot be right, in defending that right, for constituents, as other Members have pointed out, to have to put up with a small number of people in a community creating real and difficult problems. It makes it more difficult to defend an alternative lifestyle, which I would wish to defend, if we do not speak up and speak out against some of those who are conducting criminal activity. Indeed, many in the Traveller community wish for those others not to cause them problems.

For example, it cannot be right that I defend an alternative lifestyle that rips up playing fields without any thought for the children who play on them. It cannot be right that I defend an alternative lifestyle in the face of a leisure centre having to be closed to people using it because some will not conform to the rules that everybody else conforms to. So I will defend the right of people to live in the way they choose, but I will not do that—whoever they are and whatever their alternative lifestyle is—if they do not conform to the rules, regulations and laws of the country, as everybody else has to.

I have said time and again that the frustration comes when people in my community and, I am sure, in communities up and down the country see law breaking and see people doing things for which they themselves would be punished, arrested or dealt with by the authorities. In summing up, the Minister must be really clear in defending the right of people to live their lives as they choose, but he must also be clear, as we have all said, about the importance of respecting the rule of law.

Earlier, the Minister of State said he was going to consult on existing laws, and there is clearly a problem with them—if there were not, everybody would not be complaining about them. However, the police are complaining, local people are complaining and local authorities are complaining, so are we talking about new powers as well? That is my simple question for the Minister.

I conclude with this: it is a source of great strength for our country that we have different people living according to different lifestyles, which I would not personally choose, and I hope they can carry on living in that way for many years to come, but they also need to obey the law.

8.49 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Much of the debate has understandably focused on illegal encampments, and I certainly have those in my area, too, despite Bradford Council having not too long ago spent £820,000 refurbishing Gypsy encampments, including in my constituency. Even though only eight pitches are being used at Esholt, also in my constituency, that does not stop illegal encampments in other parts of the constituency, when there are perfectly good pitches to be used on such sites. It is not surprising that local people are fed up about it.

There are examples after examples. In March, it was reported that one caravan invaded an 84-year-old lady’s land. She was told that it and the other caravans trying to gain entry would leave if she paid £1,200. More recently, in August, there were reports of a man in Slough who ended up having to pay £5,000 to some Travellers after he tried to go through the legal channels and was left with so much waste at the end that the estimated clear-up was going to cost £20,000. The Government have to get a grip of this issue and I hope that the debate will spur them to do so.

In the brief time available, I want to touch on a couple of issues that have not been mentioned to do with other areas where Gypsies and Travellers cause a huge number of problems. One is the treatment of animals. The mistreatment of animals at the Gypsy site in Esholt is absolutely disgusting. In March last year I called for a debate on the subject of Travellers and animal welfare. Despite numerous complaints from me, local residents and other campaigners about the appalling treatment of animals, particularly horses, at Esholt Gypsy encampment in my constituency, for many months Bradford Council and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals did absolutely nothing.
That comes back to the same point: people feel that different rules apply to different people. If anybody else were treating animals in that way, they would be prosecuted, but because we are Gypsies and Travellers, people were pussyfooting around them and people, understandably, get fed up. I am delighted that the RSPCA eventually took some action and people were convicted—rightly so and not before time, but also not before those animals suffered far more than they should have done.

The other thing I want to point out is the very high level of criminal activity among Gypsies and Travellers. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) alluded to this when he pointed out that Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons suggested that some 5% of prisoners identified themselves as Gypsy, Romany or Traveller. It does not take a mathematical genius to work out that, if something like 0.1% of the population in England or Wales is Traveller or Gypsy, and if 5% of the prison population identify themselves as Gypsies or Travellers, we have a massive problem in terms of crime.

Some people—no doubt the sort of politically correct people who have taken over the Labour party—might well suggest that that is all down to the fact that all judges and magistrates are racist against Gypsies and unfairly punish them in the courts, but the fact of the matter is, as we all know in our heart of hearts, whether it is politically correct or not to say so, that there is a much higher level of criminal activity among Gypsies and Travellers than among the rest of the community, and that is reflected in the fact that so many more of them are in prison than is the case among the population at large. Given that we know how hard it is to be sent to prison in the first place, I begin to wonder what crimes they must be committing. This does not apply just to adults who are Gypsies and Travellers; it also applies to juveniles and young offenders. We must not pussyfoot around these issues—we must address them head on. The public expect nothing less.

8.53 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I know that I am new to this place, but I found the tone of the debate quite odd. When I saw that we were having a general debate on Gypsies and Travellers, I thought I must be missing some substantive motion that would be more specific and would narrow it down somewhat. That would have allowed us to debate a specific point, rather than having a general debate about entire communities—and I say communities on purpose because Gypsy and Traveller people are not a unified group. There is no one community that we can talk about.

The Minister’s speech positioned Gypsies, Travellers and local communities, but they are one and the same. Gypsies and Travellers are part of local communities and are our constituents if they reside in our constituencies. There should not be an othering of those communities. I know that this may be a controversial point, but imagine if there were a general debate on black people and local communities. We can hear how nonsensical that would sound to an outside observer.

Having worked alongside Gypsy and Traveller communities for many years, I know that tired and powerful stereotypes about them still exist, such as that they will put a curse on us, that they do not pay their taxes—a slur that I am very disappointed to say I heard shouted from the Government Benches during the debate—that they are more violent or that they are dirty, unruly or strange for wanting to be nomadic. We need to challenge the persistent argument that there are legitimate and non-legitimate Travellers, and I will come back to that point in a second.

Philip Davies: On the question of paying taxes, I refer the hon. Lady to what John Grant, the chief inspector at the RSPCA and a Gypsy himself, said about Gypsies and Travellers in a speech—she can watch the video of it on the RSPCA blog—to the world horse welfare conference in 2012:

“I would say 95% don’t pay any taxes. A lot of their money is held in new motors, new caravans and good quality horses.”

That is what a Gypsy and Traveller himself said. Does the hon. Lady know better than he does?

Laura Pidcock: There are many types of taxes that communities may pay. We know of very many rich people who avoid paying their taxes, but that has not been made the subject of a long debate.

There is little understanding among policy makers and legislators about nomadism historically or in contemporary life. There is often a judgmental snobbery about Gypsy and Traveller communities and traditions, which means that legislation starts from the presumption that a settled life in bricks and mortar is culturally superior. Very little attempt is made to distinguish between travelling communities, and that normalises the homogenisation and, I suppose, exoticisation of those communities.

Because of the inadequate number of sites in the UK, Gypsy and Traveller families are forced on to the road. They face journeys of hostility, with constant evictions, boulders on many green spaces and trenches dug by communities to keep trailers off. Provision is inadequate, but I have heard from very few Members any critical analysis of the consequences. Inadequate provision on the road means that Gypsy and Traveller families have little access to water and no bin provision, and they often face annoyed and angry communities. I can understand why communities are angry and annoyed if a horrendous mess is left behind, but it is not possible for those families to travel constantly. At some point, they have to stop. There must be much more provision for Travellers and Gypsies to reduce tension and secure their human rights.

My substantive point is that the planning policy for Traveller sites, which was released in 2015, is very much part of the problem. The guidance redefines who Gypsies and Travellers are for the purpose of planning. In essence, if a Gypsy or Traveller stops travelling permanently, even because of education or ill health, they cease to be a Gypsy or Traveller. In my eyes, that is cultural sanitation and real arrogance on the part of the Government.

As I have mentioned, being a Gypsy or Traveller is much more than moving from one place to another. It is part of a person’s history and ancestry—part of the fabric of their existence—and the Government’s belief that they can supersede the community’s self-definition with their own definition is absurd. If a Scottish person no longer lived in Scotland, would that mean that they were no longer Scottish? No, because nationality and cultural identity are about much more than where somebody resides. A member of the travelling community, Phien O’Reachtigan, who is part of the National Gypsy and
Traveller Council, has said that the definition has forced the community on to the road, and as a result there is more conflict between Travellers and local communities.

I finish by saying that we are all very mindful of the horrendous discrimination and racism that Gypsy and Traveller communities have experienced, and we need to create a system that helps us to eradicate such racism rather than exacerbating it. I do not have hope, listening to this debate tonight. We need to make sure that we are not part of the eradication of Gypsy and Traveller culture. This place needs to take quick action to reduce conflict. If we do not, I can only imagine that conflict in communities will increase.

8.59 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): All of us could sign up to four outcomes that relate to tonight’s debate. First, we should all believe in freedom and equality under the law. Secondly, we want the best possible community relations, but good community relations are undermined because we sadly do not always have equality under the law. Thirdly, we want good outcomes for all disadvantaged groups, but education and health outcomes for Travellers are shockingly bad, as we have heard tonight. Fourthly, we want fairness for those in the settled community who are persistently affected by adverse Traveller behaviour. We should all be able to sign up to those four principles, so I hope that we can coalesce, take some of the heat out of the debate and get some positive solutions.

I commend the intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who made the key point that local authority Gypsy and Traveller accommodation assessments are impossibly unfair on some areas that already have large numbers of people and over-occupied sites, because such areas will never be able to fulfil the requirements currently placed on them by the Planning Inspectorate. I was disappointed that the Minister who opened the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), did not mention the concerns about some privately run Traveller sites where, frankly, the rule of law does not currently apply and where horrendous things are happening.

I am aware of sites where we have seen modern slavery, the abuse of tenants who are sub-letting and all types of criminality. I ask the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), to pick up on that point about privately run sites when he responds. Local authorities cannot enforce the law on such sites, requiring a warrant to enter some of them. Planning legislation is utterly unfit for the task.

We know that rubbish has been left all over the Olympic park, and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) mentioned the incident at Langley near Slough. We also know what happened in Cromley recently, where the chief constable of Norfolk admitted that real anger and alarm had been experienced by many in that community following a rampage of Travellers that should not have been allowed.

As for action, I have several suggestions. We need an up-to-date Land Registry. We need the Gypsy and Traveller accommodation assessment to require people to answer questions in interviews. If they can avoid answering the council officer’s questions about whether they are Travellers, the system simply does not work.

We need immediate court access for local authorities. The planning policy guidance on Traveller sites from the Department should include a requirement for licensing, which would give local authorities proper power. I want the ability to impound vehicles involved in fly-tipping or other criminal activity, regardless of ownership. I also want checks on the wealth of Travellers, some of whom are enormously wealthy. Why should the taxpayer have to provide pitches for them?

A constituent—a member of the settled community—came to speak to me after a dinner last week and said that he has experienced endless break-ins and arson attacks and that sewage and rubbish have been dumped all over his land. He looked at me and said, “Does anyone in the Government care about this issue?” I want to be able to go back to him and say, “The Government get it. The Government do care. We are here for everyone to be treated equally.”

9.3 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Smethwick) (Lab): Like so many others, my constituency has been plagued by the problem of illegal encampments for the past two years. It is the same in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who cannot be here tonight because he has suffered a bereavement. I want to make it clear that I am referring to the behaviour of a problematic minority; I have no wish for my remarks to be construed as a general criticism of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people.

Enforcement and clean-ups have cost Birmingham City Council an estimated £700,000 in the past year, and there are some 395 unauthorised encampments across the seven west midlands authorities, which provides some idea of the scale of things in the area. I thank the police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, the officers and councillors of Birmingham City Council, Adrian Jones of the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups, and Abiline McShane, who is a constituent of mine. All of them have helped my understanding of the issue.

I concur with other Members’ comments about the problems that illegal encampments cause so many of our constituents. There is no single solution, but there are some things that would help. More transit sites would give people more places to go to and make it easier for the police to use powers to move people from unauthorised sites.

Police powers would be strengthened if they could direct groups across combined authorities. I urge the Government to consider a change to section 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to allow police officers to direct unauthorised encampments to a site in a neighbouring authority where the authorities are working together as a combined authority or under some other sharing arrangement. That would make a significant difference to some of the problems we have at the moment.

We could do with a further change to protect private property so that, if a landowner recovers a site from unauthorised occupation, there is some sanction to prevent repeat returns, which is what happens at the moment. I know it is not popular to ask for money, but I think the Government should consider a fund from which local authorities might draw or borrow money to help with setting up transit sites, because they are key to a long-term solution.
There are obvious problems, but I want to praise West Midlands police, Birmingham City Council and particularly Councillor Karen McCarthy for pioneering the use of injunctions against persons unknown. That marks a substantial change in the law, and will make it easier to get injunctions in the future.

I want to conclude by saying that injunctions are not the answer—we simply end up with a displacement problem—but rather a short-term solution or sticking plaster. We need to find longer-term solutions, some of which, to be fair, the Minister hinted at today. It seems to me that quite a lot of effort is being made by Members on both sides of the House for people to be reasonable. We have to find solutions that are practical and address the problems our constituents are experiencing, but that do not seek to scapegoat people unnecessarily. That will not solve our problems but create a different set of problems, and leave us with the same issues time and again.

9.7 pm

Mr Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): My constituents in Poole are reasonable and tolerant people—they believe in live and let live—but every summer, about the time of the Dorset steam fair, several groups descend on the town. We are not blessed with fields and farms, but we have parks and public open spaces, and quite often these groups illegally occupy them by causing criminal damage. The police do not take action because they do not have confidence in the law at the moment and tend to avoid getting embroiled in such situations. It then falls to the local authority, Poole Borough Council, which has a choice: either it takes legal action, which is long and imprecise and, if the group is taking action against moves a few hundred yards or to another site, a total waste of time and money; or it negotiates with the groups, providing toilets, bags, some help and support, and sometimes water, in the hope that they will leave after 10 days or two weeks.

Whatever the council does, my constituents get upset, because they have to pay the bill for the clean-up at the end of the occupation. In the meantime, they are quite often denied the use of a park, play area, facility or playground for their children and grandchildren. They get very angry about that, and they get even more angry when they phone the police and get excuses. They phone the local council, which spends most of its time explaining what it cannot do, rather than what it can do, and they then phone all the local councillors, who helpfully tell them to contact the Member of Parliament.

Eventually, my constituents get around to me, and I say that when I have had meetings with Ministers, I have made the point that sections 61 and 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 do not actually work. The council drops, confidence in councillors drops and never come out. Thirdly, as we have the joys of a two-year Session—we will not have a Queen’s Speech because of Brexit—we will have time to get legislation through. There is bound to be a criminal justice Bill, so let us use the opportunity and legislate.

9.11 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I start by saying how much I appreciated the speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), for Stockton South (Dr Williams), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), the last of whom so ably chairs the all-party parliamentary group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. They have given at least some balance to the debate.

I was dismayed, as I am sure other colleagues were, by the title of the debate. “Gypsies and Travellers and local communities” immediately suggests division. Gypsies and Travellers are part of local communities, and there is an inherent contradiction in the title of the debate. I am sorry that some of the comments we have heard today have echoed the calumnies and untruths that appear in the media, especially papers such as the Daily Mail, The Sun and the Channel 4 Gypsy wedding series. I have heard it repeated that Gypsies are rich, and that there is one law for Gypsies and Travellers and another for the settled community.

Last month, the Traveller Movement published its excellent report, “The last acceptable form of racism?”, which my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale quoted. I fear that that is what it is. Let us recall the statistics, rather than unfounded rumours. Three quarters of Gypsies and Travellers live in bricks and mortar, so only a quarter are in caravans, let alone travelling at any one time. When one breaks that down into how many are in unauthorised encampments, it comes to 4% of that 25%. So we are talking about 1% of the total at most. Just as the vast majority of Gypsies and Travellers are not causing any nuisance or problems for their neighbours, so those people who do cause such nuisance are not necessarily Gypsies or Travellers. I regret the elision of ethnic groups with antisocial behaviour, the flouting of planning laws and so on.

I saw a survey today that said that “37% of parents would be unhappy (just four out of ten would be happy) with their child going to the home of a Gypsy/Traveller for a play date. Again, this compares with just 5% for Black Caribbean and 2% for White British.”
In one way we should celebrate that no division was found—as would probably have been the case 30 years ago—between how the black community is regarded compared to the white community, but what an indictment it is that people can show that degree of prejudice. The people answering that survey are not inherently racist, but they have picked up so much from the media. It is not from their own experience, because most people do not know Gypsies and Travellers in their own communities. I hope that the House gives no succour to such views.

There is a history to this, which includes the Caravan Sites Act 1968 and what the last Labour Government did in requiring local authorities—and giving them the funds—to provide legitimate sites. I am afraid that the Conservatives in office have taken that money away and removed the requirements on local authorities. Conservative Members then throw up their hands and say, “Look at this increase in unauthorised sites.” If there are transit sites with facilities and if there is negotiated stopping, we do not get conflict. We do end up with local authorities saving money, and Gypsies and Travellers living in harmony with the settled community.

Mr Francois: If I may contradict the hon. Gentleman, Basildon Borough Council has a considerable number of sites for Travellers, yet it still suffers from the sorts of problems I outlined in my speech. He is incorrect to say that if there are sites, we do not get problems.

Andy Slaughter: I thought the right hon. Gentleman’s speech, with all due respect, was one of the worst I have heard today. I am afraid his intervention just confirms my view. He should remove the blinkers and prejudice from his own eyes before making contributions of that kind.

Let me end by speaking to those in the Gypsy and Traveller community, because they do watch these debates. I praise organisations such as Traveller Law Reform Project, The Traveller Movement, Friends, Families and Travellers, and the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit, who admirably represent those communities. There are, notwithstanding some of the speeches they will have heard today, many parliamentarians, past and present, who have done their best to represent Gypsy and Traveller communities. I particularly pay tribute to the late Lord Avebury, who introduced the Caravan Sites Act 1968 and was an advocate throughout his parliamentary lifetime; Tim Boswell, who is now in the other place; Richard Bennett from the Local Government Association; Julie Morgan, who used to run the all-party group; and Rodney Bickerstaffe. I will end by quoting from his obituary in The Guardian this week, which said:

“At one time his mother’s family were so poor they lived in a Gypsy caravan in a field. Unsurprisingly, given his unstinting championing of the underdog, Bickerstaffe was one of the few public figures to loudly champion the cause of Travellers over the years.”

I wish that more Members of this House would emulate Rodney’s example.

9.16 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for bringing the debate gently back to Essex once more.

I rise to stand up for my community in Tendring and Clacton, which has the beautiful aesthetics of a rural district. However, so much open space makes it vulnerable to illegal encampments. We are a coastal resort and, like many others around the country, we have regular incursions, especially during the summer and over bank holiday weekends. In short, we pretty much know when and where to expect incursions, and we should be able to react swiftly and positively. It needs to be stated that we have a moral obligation to all our citizens to make sure local policy works for everyone. That, quite rightly, includes the provision of good quality legal Traveller sites. However, that cannot overshadow the damage inflicted on land, policing and local authority budgets, and on community relations, from excessive and illegal encampments. We have legal Traveller sites, but that is not where Travellers necessarily want to go.

In May this year, three caravans and a van arrived at Vista Road recreation ground in Clacton, in the corner of the field next to the boundary with Clacton County High School. At Easter, 16 caravans stayed on land at the front of the Columbine Centre, next to Walton-on-the-Naze Lifestyles, making it their home for almost a week. We had to clean up for both and it was very expensive. Travellers also pitched up on a school playing field, just as children left to begin their summer holidays, with seven caravans and vehicles arriving on land that backs on to Whitehall Academy and Clacton Coastal Academy.

This causes great disruption to the community and it must be managed in the right way. For my Clacton constituency in Essex, there are broadly two routes for redress against illegal encampments. First, the Essex countywide Traveller unit—ECTU—is informed. Its team makes a visit and then serves a direction to leave. That gives the group 24 hours to move off. If they do not do so, the whole process of court action begins. Alternatively, the police have the section 61 powers, which can be used straight away if criminal damage or public safety is an issue, or if more than six vehicles form the encampment. I commend the Home Office for working closely with the police to ensure the powers they have are fit for purpose. However, the decision on when and whether to use police powers is an independent operational decision for the police. Put simply, it is a judgment call for the police.

In our community, police action is preferred as it is swift and shows the full force of the law to those who seek to break it. I am mindful, however, of the issue of police capacity in enforcing such laws. I personally would be relaxed about paying a few more pounds a year on my precept if the 2% cap were removed, as it would allow us to increase police funding and give us greater capacity to use the current laws. While the police precept cap seems to be a separate issue, I must say that my constituents wish to see the law robustly enforced.

Julian Knight: The problem is, though, that there is no guarantee that the money would be spent on that. It could just fall into the general police budget.

Giles Watling: It could indeed, but we have to find the money from somewhere, and it is lacking in Tendring district. I had a long talk with my local commander just two weeks ago and I know roughly where we are going.

My local residents would not get away with illegal developments, and neither must anyone else—it is one law, and we must all be equal under it. Section 61 powers should be used wherever necessary, and the appropriate resources must be part of that—not a popular thing to
say, I know. Essex has a very low precept, and thus a 2% increase would raise far less per head than a 2% increase for a force with a higher precept. I do not think my constituents would begrudge an extra £10 a year or so if it meant an increased policing capacity to act swiftly and decisively on issues such as these illegal sites, and of course on many other criminal activities.

We need a two-pronged conversation about the fitness of the law and the ability to deliver it. All people in Clacton want is fairness under the law. Seeing an illegal encampment tackled is a hallmark of this concept. While I am open to conversations about changing or tightening the law, as mentioned earlier, the starting point must be giving the current law the opportunity to function at its peak potential and thus scrapping the precept cap and increasing policing capacity to tackle the illegal encampment. Then we can perhaps move on to the illegal damage done.

In one case, Travellers arrived at a green flag park in the centre of Rochester—it has a friends group and is a jewel in the crown of Rochester—on a Friday evening. Sadly, we could not get a representative from the council to attend. The police decided to turn up that evening, and it took some time to get the police to turn up to try and protect the site. I was actually contacted by constituents and my fellow ward councillor, Stuart Tranter, who happened to be mayor at the time, had to go out at 12 o’clock at night to speak to the Travellers because unfortunately we could not get a representative from the council to attend. The excuse given by the duty officer at the council was that he was too fearful to attend on his own. I pointed out that I was the MP and down there on my own and that I would speak to people within my constituency.

Another major issue is the effect on businesses. We have seen incursions not just on council land but on private land and industrial estates. Some businesses in Strood have contacted me and said that it has affected their business and their ability just to get into work and operate.

I want to focus on the fairness of the illegal incursions. We expect everybody to abide by the law and accept that there are rules we have to abide by. Over the last couple of years, Medway has seen a large increase in the number of illegal incursions. Medway was formerly part of the county of Kent, which has a long history of Travellers, Roma and Gypsies. As a county, we have been extremely tolerant and accepting of their way of life, but over the last couple of years we have seen our town centre car parks used as encampments and criminal damage done.

In one case, Travellers arrived at a green flag park in the centre of Rochester—it has a friends group and is a jewel in the crown of Rochester—on a Friday evening. Sadly, we could not get a representative from the council to attend. The police decided to turn up that evening, and it took some time to get the police to turn up to try and protect the site. I was actually contacted by constituents and my fellow ward councillor, Stuart Tranter, who happened to be mayor at the time, had to go out at 12 o’clock at night to speak to the Travellers because unfortunately we could not get a representative from the council to attend. The excuse given by the duty officer at the council was that he was too fearful to attend on his own. I pointed out that I was the MP and down there on my own and that I would speak to people within my constituency.

Another major issue is the effect on businesses. We have seen incursions not just on council land but on private land and industrial estates. Some businesses in Strood have contacted me and said that it has affected their business and their ability just to get into work and operate.

As I have said, in the past there has been what I regard as a reluctance on the part of the police to use the powers that they have. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) that it comes down very much to the individual judgment call of the police at the time. In the case of one incursion in my constituency, a van was driven across a green park space, pushing against a resident. The police decided to tell the resident that he should behave because he might be arrested, while allowing the Gypsies to stay where they were. That caused discomfort in the community, and many residents were up in arms very late at night.

Luckily, because of my action, there is now an agreement between Medway council and the local police and a procedure, and I hope that that will help next year. However, I welcome the consultation, because it is clear that the present arrangement is not working in built-up areas such as mine. We need to act if we are to retain the confidence of the community.

9.26 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Everyone in the House will agree that members of our communities have a right to choose alternative ways of life, but none of them has the right to opt out of British law. When that breaks down, not only community cohesion but respect for the rule of law and those who represent the people affected break down as well.

Over the past three summers, there have been a number of Traveller camps in Dudley. Some of those camps, although unauthorised, have caused very little damage or disruption. Indeed, at least one group of travellers from Scandinavia tidied up after themselves, mowed the grass, and probably left the pitch in a better condition than they had found it in. Sadly, however, too many others have caused significant criminal damage and disruption to local communities. There have been illegal incursions in areas including Netherton, Woodside, Wordsley and Kingswinford. There has been defecation and urination on playing pitches and children’s playing areas. While the impact of that is, of course, felt most keenly by residents in the immediate area, the cost of dealing with it—in terms of enforcement and clearing up—is felt by the whole borough and has amounted to more than £150,000.

The reflex reaction is that the police need more powers, but there is rarely any suggestion of what those powers would look like, how they would be used and, indeed, whether they would be used. I certainly support giving the police new powers to deal with illegal Traveller camps, but I think that many of the reasons that are given for the fact that the police often seem to consider it inappropriate or unlawful to use section 61 powers because of the lack of welfare assessments and the needs of the children are likely to be applied to any such new powers. We need far clearer guidance, because there is enormous variation across the country, and often within police forces, in the way in which the section 61 powers are used. I look to the Minister, working with colleagues in the Home Office, to produce that clearer guidance, because there is enormous variation across the country, and often within police forces, in the way in which the section 61 powers are used. I look to the Minister, working with colleagues in the Home Office, to produce that clearer guidance, on which councils and police forces can rely, so that they know when it is appropriate to use the powers that the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 appears to grant to police forces.

We need reform of how section 62A is structured, with regard to the area to which Travellers can be moved for a transit camp, and in how capacity is assessed, so that combined authorities can pool their capacity and the police can move unauthorised camps into transit camps, such as those being developed in Dudley.

9.30 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the proposed review of the law in this area because, as the Minister will know, I have asked questions about this before. I want to reference the
Library, which is usually a great source of information, and to thank it for its briefing paper for this debate, which states:

“Unauthorised sites are frequently a source of tension between the travelling and settled communities... a shortage of permanent and transit Gypsy and Traveller sites continues to be a pressing issue, which results in unauthorised encampments”.

However, I must say that this is wrong in principle. All parties here agree that we need to build more homes, but if I was to build a home unlawfully and say that that was the reason, I would be laughed out of court.

We do have discrimination in this country, not against Travellers and Gypsies, given the number of advocates they clearly have on the Opposition Benches, but against the hard-working, honest residents of communities up and down the land, the silent majority and too often the forgotten people. There is not a level playing field and something must be done.

Whether it is section 77 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which takes too long to effect—a constituent wrote to me about their frustration at the length of time that these matters seem to take—or section 61 of the same Act, which gives the police powers that they cannot use, perhaps because the disruption is below the threshold of public disorder, which perhaps will be dealt with in the review, or section 62A, which I referenced in an earlier intervention, which gives the police the powers that I think they need to direct trespassers on any land, but which is restricted because there must be a Traveller pitch in the same local authority area, this is unfair. If I build a home without permission because I want to live somewhere, the local authority does not have to give me another plot. It is a totally unlevel playing field and something must be done.

In the short time available, I want to say something about local councillors and councils. I commend County Councillor Rhysian Vaughan, who has been working on a Traveller case in Bramley, where it is alleged that the children of Travellers have been firing ball bearings at windows in the vicinity. I pay tribute to Borough Councillor Venetia Rowland, who has been working on a case involving the illegal felling of 500 trees in Sherfield, bordering the residents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) over in Sherfield Park. That is totally wrong. They know how to play the system and they have played it, and it is unacceptable. Some parish councils are also worthy of mention, such as Silchester Parish Council, which has been tackling the retrospective planning application for an unauthorised Traveller encampment.

Even though the principle is wrong, my constituents recognise that, within the law today, it is necessary to provide those other sites. One wrote to me, stating:

“I believe that locally there is already provision for travellers... albeit in Berkshire, so the broad area cannot be characterised as failing to provide facilities for travellers”.

But the legislation does not take that into account, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) mentioned earlier.

I share the sentiments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe). I hope that today’s debate will be the start of a real shift in Government policy—a policy that has not shifted since 1994—and that it will lead to the Government reconsidering criminal legislation in this area and recasting existing legislation to make it work. More must be done. Constituents demand it—and, boy, do they deserve it.

9.34 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I do not know whether you have ever visited Solihull, Mr Speaker, but it is blessed with many parks and other green and open spaces. I, like the rest of my town, was really looking forward to spending the summer enjoying those open spaces, but unfortunately we have attracted an unprecedented spate of Traveller incursions, which has tested Solihull Council’s defences and my constituents’ patience to the limit.

Unauthorised camps deny residents access to shared community spaces, but that is the least of the trouble: they are also very often accompanied by a spate of antisocial and even criminal behaviour. Not only have local businesses reported vandalism, but in the most recent incursions an elderly lady and autistic child were attacked in Shirley Park.

I have even had reports of rubbish being taken from Birmingham, where there has been a prolonged bin strike, and dumped on public land in Solihull by groups of Travellers in exchange for cash payments. The distress caused can be measured by the huge volume of emails I have received over the summer and the almost 4,000 signatures on my petition calling for the council to invest in new, more effective protections for public spaces, as well as the targeted injunctions mentioned earlier by the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar). The rich irony is that I know for a fact that those injunctions in Sandwell have worked—the groups have moved down to Solihull. That pattern is repeated across the country, judging by what hon. Members have said today.

I have also spent months in close contact with council officers and the police communicating the concerns of residents and local landlords. Too often, I have found that a particular group were simply being chased from park to park, with a council needing to seek a new eviction notice in the courts every time the Travellers pitched up at a new location. Other bands would circumvent court orders by temporarily merging with others and parting again in new combinations to which the order no longer applied. The police potentially have some powers under section 61, but the bar for implementation can be very high indeed. I have argued strongly that that bar needs to be lowered and that the repetitive nature of these incursions should be taken into account.

A lot of money has also been spent on the proofing against Traveller incursions of public spaces and parks. Okay, that can work in some instances, but it can also ruin the aspect of these green spaces. Why should my constituents have to tolerate trenches being dug, trees being uprooted and bollards being put in place? Why should council officers not be at work because they are guarding other green spaces, while Travellers are being moved on from other locations?

Many suggestions have been made today, and I am sure that stories such as mine have been repeated throughout the debate. I appeal to Ministers. They said that the review will consider the law; I presume that that will mean new laws. I hope that they will take soundings from my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon
and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr Symes). Enough is enough: we cannot keep playing this game every summer with our constituents—the public land, the cost, the damage. The Government must toughen up the laws. Let us give them the sinews to act.

9.38 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Odd stuff has been going on in the Chamber this evening, Mr Speaker; I have been keeping an eye on it while you have been gone. I hope that it will extend not just to local authorities, but to businesses and private landowners, who are also affected.

The Minister has mentioned that constituents can feed into the process. I will be encouraging mine to do so, because Gypsy and Traveller-related matters, particularly unauthorised encampments, are currently the biggest issue in my postbag and email inbox. It is fair to say that the issue takes up a huge proportion of time in my office in telephone calls from residents who are feeling frustrated, scared, upset, sometimes intimidated and sometimes, understandably, quite angry. For us in Aldridge-Brownhills, these are not just one-off, short-stay visits that leave without a trace; no, they have become regular incursions, like the ones we have heard about this evening, since the start of the summer. However, we are talking not just about this summer; this has been building over a number of years. The encampments often last a week at a time, and it is not uncommon for them to comprise more than 50 caravans.

We have seen encampments in Aldridge, Brownhills, Pelsall and Walsall Wood. It is understandable that my constituents are at breaking point with what has become a merry-go-round of cat and mouse. “When will it end?” they are asking. They are tired and fed up with the antisocial behaviour, the noise, the rubbish and the mess—it can be household, domestic and even human waste—that is so often left in the trail. It is the council that is left to clear up the mess and the council tax payer who picks up the bill. In the borough of Walsall, this runs into hundreds of thousands of pounds. This is money that could be going back into our communities, to those services that we really value and want to see strengthened.

As Members have probably gathered, I feel strongly about this. I feel strongly that local councils need to work much more closely with the police and that the Government need to seek to understand—this is why the consultation is a starting point—whether existing legislation needs to be implemented more effectively, which would be a help, or strengthened. Some suggestions could include looking at sections 61, 62, 77 and 78 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994; the Irish solution, which was touched on earlier; common law; the use of injunctions; the use of transit sites; and criminal justice measures covering littering, fly-tipping and environmental protections. Basically, what more can be done to protect sites? A long-term solution is needed, but my residents need some short-term protections too.

I had wanted to touch on Traveller issues relating to educational attainment and health inequalities, and on modern slavery, which we should address, but sadly I do not have the time to do so. This evening, I wish to keep the focus on the areas I have outlined, as they have been very much raised by my constituents. It is not good enough for public bodies to gold plate human rights and equalities legislation. The issues faced by the settled community when an unauthorised encampment arrives on their doorstep are huge, as I have seen all too often. The cost to the council and the police, and the pressure and strain on resources, can be immense. I am fortunate
in that I have a Westminster Hall debate on Thursday; I plug it now to anyone wants to contribute. Let me close with a reminder of a salient point: with rights must come respect, and with responsibilities will come respect.

9.45 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Disappointingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, tonight’s debate has focused on the challenges experienced by communities as a result of unauthorised encampments. Although we should not dismiss or minimise the impact of those sites, we should not lose sight of the genuine, law-abiding Gypsy Traveller experiences. I have been looking through “The last acceptable form of racism?”, the report produced by the Traveller Movement, and some of the examples it contains are distressing:

“Schools are the worst. Gypsy children are constantly bullied”;
“Even the teachers would call our family the ‘Gypsy family’.

Like we were a disease”;
“Because we mam couldn’t read or write, they belittled her”;
“Many kids used to verbally abuse me over being a Gypsy”;
“Schools don’t take bullying of Traveller children seriously”;

and

“If I put Romany in the equality monitoring section, never got interviews”.

This goes on and on in different areas, be it healthcare, policing or access to services. These things are all part and parcel of our communities and we have a responsibility to deal with then.

The repeated demonising and marginalisation of a whole community risks further isolating them and growing the sense of adversarial aggression. This House has a responsibility to set the right tone in a debate such as this and not allow a genuine desire to raise issues from constituencies around the country—I believe that is what it is—to spill over into discriminatory language. Thankfully, this evening’s debate has mainly been undertaken with great care, and I wish to thank colleagues from across the House for their considered contributions.

One in eight, or 13%, of Traveller caravans are on unauthorised sites, and many more authorised sites are needed. The number of caravans has grown in the past decade, but changes to councils’ duties since 2010 mean that Ministers cannot accurately establish the need for sites and homes, and cannot plan or secure any new supply needed to meet demand. The west midlands has been very well represented here this evening, and clearly a significant level of disruption has been experienced in that community, but it is important that we look at the fact that across the eastern and west midlands regions combined, just 15 out of 70 local authorities have identified full five-year plans for deliverable sites. Clearly, there is great scope for improvement on that, in order to try to ease those tensions and tackle any unsuitable sites that are being used.

Let me deal with some of the comments made by some of my colleagues. First, we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who made the point about unauthorised encampments but has experienced 140 unauthorised sites, which have caused difficulties, including hazardous fly-tipping. He says that these are not encampments but unlawful businesses, and perhaps a change of view as to how people are operating would assist in dealing with some of those issues. He recommended getting magistrates to give orders over the weekend and utilising the DVLA to search vehicle registrations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) mentioned that there is a potential for bias and racial discrimination to be bred if we allow the current tone of debate to grow in the way that it is doing. He pointed out that the Government have removed councils’ duty to conduct assessments of need for facilities, education and health, and he urged them to put an end to the drift, get a grip and not kick the issue into the long grass.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr. McFadden) expressed his frustration with the reputational damage done to the majority of the Traveller community by a small minority. He mentioned the £150,000 to £300,000 a year that is spent on legal costs and cleaning up. In tight financial times for local authorities, that is clearly a great source of frustration, particularly for settled residents who see money spent on what they would consider unnecessary issues. We should consider his point about how to secure sites to prevent future abuse. He also discussed council and police powers, the ability to move encampments, and ways to get those who cause the damage to meet the clear-up costs, because as it stands the law is not fit for purpose.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) spoke about the removal of the administrative borders of local authority areas—as did many other Members—to allow police forces to tackle cross-border illegal activity to alleviate pressure on unauthorised sites. He urged tougher and swifter action against those who act illegally.

I was pleased to hear the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), because it changed the general tone of the debate. He gave a much more compassionate and broad consideration of the debate subject, highlighting the fact that those in greatest need are the least likely to access the support services that they need. He said we should ensure that GPs should not be able to refuse to register those from the Gypsy, Traveller and Romany community because they have no fixed abode. He also mentioned how the Government talk a good game on tackling burning injustices but fail in this arena.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said how important it was for those in public office not to make sweeping generalisations. She said that we should not make negative statements without the evidence to support them. She reiterated how fundamental education is to our society and spoke about how marginalised children from the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller communities are in schools, affecting their ability to attain academically, to integrate into society and to access public facilities. She also mentioned the case of a child having to move schools 11 times because of bullying. I found that particularly distressing, because in any other circumstances there would be outrage from us all.
My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said it was important to support people in how
they choose to live, but that we must not allow those who break the law to get away with it—we must consider
the effect they have on other people. [Interruption.] I appreciate the notice about the lack of time. I just wish
to mention very quickly the contributions by my hon. Friends the Members for North West Durham (Laura
Pidcock), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). They all made
incredibly important points and I am sorry that I cannot go into them in more detail.

In closing, will the Minister please think again and restore the requirement for local authorities to assess
these communities’ housing needs? How many sites have been established since 2015 and how much of the
£60 million for affordable housing has been allocated to new or refurbished Traveller sites?

9.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities
and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank all
right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to
the debate. Given the very limited amount of time
available to me, I might not be able to address every
single issue, but it is absolutely clear that there are strong
feelings around the House. I, too, feel extremely strongly
about this issue: so many of the challenges that colleagues
have mentioned—particularly those relating to illegal
encampments—remind me of the challenges I have faced
in my own constituency, Nuneaton. Many of my residents
have suffered in a very similar way from illegal encampments.

I am therefore very pleased that today we have signalled
our intention to seek a call for evidence to review the
way in which existing powers are enforced and to understand
what more can be done to tackle many of the issues
raised in the debate. However, I caution Members because,
whatever powers this House has given, and may give, it
is important to say that those powers will inevitably be
enforced at local level and that enforcement is the key to
success in this regard.

Let me deal with a number of points that have been
made. There was a strong feeling among Members that
there should be parity among all communities in respect
of the planning system. That was certainly a point
made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh
and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the
Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena).
They also said that they expected enforcement powers
to be used in a proportionate but fair manner by local
authorities. They were also concerned about the green
belt—we all value the sanctity of the green belt. We
have made it clear that temporary or permanent Traveller
sites are not appropriate green-belt development and
that the personal circumstances and needs of particular
families are unlikely to clearly outweigh the harm to the
green belt. I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for
Rugby (Mark Pawsey) said in relation to the village
of Wolvey. He set out his feelings with regard to the national
planning policy framework, and he should consider
making a contribution on that matter during the call for
evidence.

Members have also mentioned unauthorised
encampments. The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon
Coaker) made the extremely important point that
everybody, no matter who they are or whatever part of
the community they represent, must comply with the
rule of law. My hon. Friends the Members for South
West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for Dudley
South (Mike Wood) also covered that important point.
My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire
also mentioned the challenges of private sites that he
has experienced in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby mentioned
another important point: the Warwickshire protocol
that is being developed for dealing with illegal Traveller
encampments. It is important that we see strong local
leadership to use the powers that are already available.

In the call for evidence, one matter is likely to feature
very strongly. My right hon. Friend the Member for
Rayleigh and Wickford and my hon. Friend the Members
for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), for South Basildon
and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), for Wells (James
Heappey), for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and
for Clacton (Giles Watling) talked about other jurisdictions
and what has been done in Ireland in relation to the
problem with illegal encampments.

I do not have a great deal of time to cover all the
other points that were made. I wish to bring some
balance to this debate, because this is not just about the
challenges that we have with Gypsies and Travellers in
our constituency. It is also about a proportionate response.
As we have heard, the challenges that we face are
generally from a small group of the various Gypsy and
Traveller communities, and we need to ensure that we
balance this with fairness so that Gypsies and Travellers
do not face issues such as hate crime, which have been
mentioned. We need to be clear that, whatever it is
perpetrated against, hate crime is not acceptable in our
society. The issue of life chances for Gypsies and Travellers
was also mentioned. Much of what has been said tonight
will be picked up during the race disparity audit that is
being considered by the Government.

To come back to the central point, we are absolutely
committed to ensuring that Gypsies and Travellers are
fully integrated in our society and that they enjoy the
rights of our society, but as important are the responsibilities
that everybody in our society has. I am confident from
tonight’s debate that we will be able to take this matter
forward. I look forward to hon. Members contributing
to the important call for evidence that is being undertaken
by the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Gypsies and Travellers and local communities.
Air Rifles

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

Mr Speaker: As I am often moved to observe, and I observe again, if there are Members who, quite unaccountably, are leaving the Chamber because, for reasons of lack of taste or other considerations, they do not wish to be present to hear the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) on the Adjournment, I trust that they will do so speedily and quietly so that the rest of us can hear the hon. Lady.

10 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, thank you for allowing this debate on the use and control of air rifles. This is a subject that the House has debated in the past, but which continues to have serious consequences for many of those we represent. Too many lives have been unnecessarily lost and too many serious injuries have been inflicted upon innocent civilians. Sadly, a large proportion of these victims are children and young people. We cannot ignore the issue and we need to do something about it.

Let me explain my interest in the issue. On 1 July 2016, my young constituent Harry Studley—then just 18 months old—was shot in the head and critically injured with an air rifle. Thanks to the efforts of the local emergency services, including the swift intervention of the Great Western air ambulance and the clinical staff at Bristol Children’s Hospital, little Harry pulled through despite his injuries. Harry’s parents, Ed and Amy, have explained to me that he has been left partially sighted, suffers memory loss and has post-traumatic seizures as a result of the incident. A local man was convicted of causing Harry grievous bodily harm and jailed for two years.

Many people living in Bristol and the west country will recall hearing about this devastating incident in the local media. Parents listening to the heart-breaking details of the case would understandably have asked, “Could this happen to my family? Could the incident have been prevented? What can be done to make these weapons safer? Should these weapons be banned?”.

Those are all valid questions and there are more. In young Harry’s case, it was suggested that the weapon was being cleaned. Would legislation making trigger locks compulsory on these weapons have prevented this dreadful and life-changing incident? We will never know in this specific case, but we have a solemn duty as elected representatives to scrutinise, to keep asking questions on behalf of those we serve and to bring greater safety.

As Harry continues to recover, I pay tribute to his family. They have shown great resilience in the face of adversity. Crucially, they have been tenacious and determined that we should all learn from the incident that transformed their futures. As part of this work, they have closely monitored further incidents with air weapons. They were encouraged by the debate held in Westminster Hall in September 2016 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), whose long-standing interest in the issue dates from 1999 when a constituent of his, aged just 13, was killed. The 2016 debate called for the introduction of trigger locks, the safe storage of air weapons and a review of the impact of recent Scottish legislation, which I will come to later.

In a written response to my right hon. Friend, the then Home Office Minister responsible indicated that the Government would “review the current air gun leaflet” and “keep a close eye on the introduction of air weapons licensing in Scotland”, an issue to which I now turn.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this topic to the House for consideration. She will know, after discussions I had with her earlier, that Northern Ireland has very strict legislation covering air rifles and, indeed, all weapons. I say kindly and carefully to her that the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Countryside Alliance have laid out strict protocols and rules within the remit of the law. Does she feel that the law in England and the UK is sufficient to stop these things happening?

Karin Smyth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, for the information he has shared with me and for his expertise in this area. The point I will come on to is that we need to learn in England from what happens in Northern Ireland and Scotland and that children in Bristol South should be afforded the same level of security as children there, and I will return to that.

Hon. Members will know that, following a series of tragic incidents involving air weapons, the Scottish Government acted to address the problem. Under the Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2015, it has been an offence since the start of this year to use, possess, purchase or acquire an air weapon without holding an air weapon certificate. It is a condition of that licence that weapons are securely stored in order that access and possession cannot be gained by a person who is not authorised. The licence application also requires the disclosure of criminal convictions, and the police must be satisfied that the applicant can possess an air weapon “without danger to the public safety or to the peace” before issuing an air weapon certificate. That is over and beyond section 21 of the Firearms Act 1968, under which a person who has been convicted of an offence may be prohibited from possessing firearms, including air weapons.

In the run-up to the change in the law, 20,000 air weapons were surrendered to the authorities in Scotland and destroyed—20,000 fewer potentially lethal weapons were on the streets, and I think the House will agree that that makes Scotland safer. However, in England, just since the start of May 2017, there have been incidents involving air weapons and children in Carlisle, Bury, Chelmsford, Ipswich, Exeter and, most tragically, Loughborough, where, in August, a five-year-old boy was reportedly shot and killed with an air rifle—another tragic child death. In spring 2016, a 13-year-old boy was killed in Bury St Edmunds.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing what I consider a very important issue to the House. I pay tribute to that young man, and to his family and friends, all of whom have come to see
me, and we have discussed some of the items the hon. Lady is raising today. Does she also agree that guns that are not manufactured by licensed manufacturers cause a problem and need to be looked at? There are also issues around air triggers, magazines that do not necessarily show that they have been discharged and ammunition being left in the chamber that is not known about. Does she agree that those are the sort of things we should be looking at?

**Karin Smyth**: I am grateful for that intervention, and I certainly want to learn from other hon. Members’ experience and work in this area. I assured the Studley family in my constituency that, on issues such as this, hon. Members will work together across party to achieve the best legislation.

In his speech last year, my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Delryn informed the House that 17 children had died as a result of air weapons in the last 27 years. Sadly, it appears that that number has risen again, and I repeat that we need to do something about that. I ask the Minister to reconsider the response given last year to my right hon. Friend; it is simply not good enough to review the text of a leaflet.

In this House, on 20 April, the then Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), told me the Government have “no plans to ban or licence”—[Official Report, 20 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 801.]

air weapons, on the basis that misuse applies only to a small minority of people. Many of the people we represent would argue that many of the laws that currently protect them from all sorts of heinous acts are in place to protect them from a small minority, and even if only a small minority is affected, the consequences of their actions are grave and merit our attention, regardless of the numbers.

Many hon. Members share an interest in animal welfare, and I would add that, since successfully securing this debate, I have been contacted by Cats Protection, the International Fund for Animal Welfare and others.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I became aware of this issue when cats in my constituency were shot and I looked into it. We now know that over 1,800 cats have been shot since 2012. Cats Protection has a live petition, which already has 72,000 signatures, calling for the licensing of airguns. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time we updated our legislation in line with Scotland and Northern Ireland?

**Karin Smyth**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention and I know from my reading of previous debates that she has done a lot of work on this issue. I shall certainly be asking for more updates on the comparison with Scotland to identify whether that is the right way to go.

Most of the law in England and Wales on air weapons dates from the 1960s and it is time properly to re-examine the legislation to see whether it is fit for the 21st century. When an issue has such a devastating effect on the lives of families with such regularity, I would expect the Government to be considering such action already. It is for the Minister to decide what any review should cover, but at the very least I would expect a detailed consideration of licensing in the light of the change to the law in Scotland; of whether the fitting of trigger locks should be mandatory for all new air weapons sold; and of whether the reasonable precautions requirement on all airgun owners for the safe storage of air weapons and ammunition is adequate. My constituents are also interested in laws governing the registration and transfer of these weapons and would be grateful for an explanation of the current position and any proposed changes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise these questions and stress in closing that the purpose of my securing this debate is not to ban air weapons outright. It is about their safe use. I want children and young people in my constituency to be protected from future tragedies like those that have been all too common in recent years. Surely Bristol South’s children deserve the same protection as children living in Scotland.

10.11 pm

**The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service** (Mr Nick Hurd): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) not just on securing the debate but on her persistence in pursuing an issue of great importance and on how she has framed tonight’s debate on safer use of airguns. I know that she has been concerned about the issue for some time following the appalling injury suffered by Harry Studley in her constituency. He was just 18 months old when he was shot with an air rifle in July of last year, and I join the hon. Lady in applauding the resilience of his family and the actions of the emergency services in saving his life.

As will become clear in my speech, the Government are not remotely complacent on this issue, but it is important to make the point early on that we have strong firearms controls in this country. They are there for a purpose—to minimise the risk of harm to the public—and, within the general consensus about the importance of these controls, the regulation of air weapons has long been a matter of debate, with lawful users arguing that they should be allowed to enjoy their property without unnecessary restrictions, and others arguing for tougher regulation to improve public safety.

As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, the recent decision by the Scottish Government to introduce a licensing regime for lower-powered air weapons has quite rightly led to a renewed focus on the regulatory position in England and Wales. She will know as well as I do that a balance has to be struck, particularly regarding weapons that present a lower risk and weapons that are used in well-regulated environments such as shooting clubs.

I have listened carefully to the hon. Lady’s remarks this evening, and I have also given careful consideration to the report presented by the coroner in relation to the tragic death of Benjamin Wragge, who was 13 when he was accidentally shot with an air weapon in 2016. I have recently written to the coroner and confirmed my intention to review the regulation of air weapons in England and Wales. I think that this is an appropriate time to take stock of the regulatory position and assess whether the current controls, which are already strong, continue to be appropriate and effective.

**Jim Shannon**: The contributions from Members who have personal knowledge of the matter have made this a difficult Adjournment debate. When it comes to looking
further into legislative change, will the Minister assure hon. Members that consultation will take place with shooting organisations such as the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Countryside Alliance?

Mr Hurd: There is no point in having a consultation if it does not include the opinions of those with a voice and an educated view, so I give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I also provide the assurance that I will be meeting members of Benjamin Wragge’s family later this year. I will listen carefully to their views, as I will to those of their Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has written to me on the matter.

I intend to look carefully at the existing controls on air weapons, including how best to ensure that such weapons are stored safely and securely, so that they do not get into the hands of children. The hon. Member for Bristol South suggested that features such as trigger locks should be used, or that air weapons should be required to be stored in a locked cabinet. Those issues need to be looked at in some detail.

I should make it clear to the House that, although I think that a review of air weapon regulation is important and timely, we will do so against the background of existing controls that are, by all international comparisons, very robust and of a long-term decline in the number of crimes involving air weapons. For the record, I will set out some of the existing controls. First, the law recognises that some air weapons are more dangerous than others. In particular, only lower-powered air weapons can be held without a licence. More dangerous air weapons need to be licensed by the police. In addition, I believe that we have robust controls to prevent unauthorised access.

Jo Churchill: On a point of clarification, if a lower-velocity weapon is adapted to give it a higher velocity—I think that is, if not simple to do, quite easily achievable—how do we regulate for that, if there is no form of thinking that is, if not simple to do, quite easily achievable—velocity weapon is adapted to give it a higher velocity—I

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend predictably makes a very good point. That is exactly the kind of circumstance that the review needs to look at, to make sure that regulation and controls are on top of existing practice in the market.

The point that I am trying to make to the House is that existing controls, particularly in relation to preventing unauthorised access, seem robust, on the face of it. The sale of air weapons to those aged under 18 is prohibited, and except in special circumstances under-18s cannot possess them. Air weapons can be sold only by registered firearms dealers. These dealers must keep records of all sales, including details of the purchaser, and they must complete the sale in person. In respect of online sales, although advertising on the internet and collecting payment via websites is permitted, the final transfer of the air weapon must be completed face to face and not through the post. That is an important safeguard against under-18s accessing such weapons online.

Those restrictions help us to reduce the risk of misuse. Alongside that, we know that accidents involving air weapons can occur, and that when they do, the consequences can be tragic and absolutely devastating. This is why it is vital that all who are in lawful possession of air weapons store them and handle them securely and safely.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) mentioned the case that occurred in Loughborough over the summer, although I am not going to talk about it because it is still subject to investigation and potentially other proceedings. She highlighted that a number of incidents have, tragically, involved young children. Will the Minister consider perhaps this is something that we might write to him about in a review whether there is an argument for saying that when air rifles are handled while children are around, there should be extra requirements on the behaviour of adults, if I may put it like that? That might provide an additional safeguard.

Mr Hurd: I thank my right hon. Friend for her intervention. I have a huge amount of sympathy for that instinct, and I encourage her to write to me in along those lines, as she suggests.

The Home Office provides guidance on the practical steps that owners can take to secure air weapons and on how to handle them. We will shortly—genuinely shortly—be publishing a revised edition of the guidance, which will be available online and to new purchasers as a leaflet to help reinforce the important safety messages. We will also promote the messages in magazines that are aimed at air weapon users. It is an offence for a person to fail to take reasonable steps to prevent unauthorised access to their airguns by those under the age of 18. That measure was introduced to help prevent more tragic accidents, following a number of deaths involving young people under the age of 18 playing with air weapons.

When I look at what is in place to avoid the misuse of air weapons, I see a robust set of regulations. It is an offence for any person “to use an air weapon for firing a pellet beyond the boundaries of the premises. It is an offence for a supervising adult to allow a person under the age of 18 to use an air weapon for firing a pellet beyond the boundaries of premises. It is an offence... to have an air weapon in a public place without a reasonable excuse... It is an offence to trespass with an air weapon... It is an offence to have an air weapon if you are prohibited from possessing a firearm... It is an offence to fire an air weapon without lawful authority or excuse within 50 feet... of the centre of a public road in such a way as to cause a road user to be injured, interrupted or endangered. It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill certain wild animals and birds... It is an offence to knowingly cause a pet animal to suffer unnecessarily... which could be committed by shooting at a pet animal. It is an offence to have an air weapon with intent to damage or to destroy property. It is also an offence to have air weapons and be reckless as to whether property would be damaged or destroyed. It is an offence to have an air weapon with intent to endanger life.”

Looking at the statistics, it is clear that most offences involving air weapons—around two-thirds—relate to criminal damage. As for death or serious injury relating to air weapon offences, there were around 30 serious injuries relating to air weapons or their misuse in 2015-16. Although the number of air weapon offences has decreased significantly, reducing by 77% between 2003 and 2016, there was a rise last year, so it is clear that we cannot be complacent, which is why I have instructed the review that I have mentioned this evening. I hope that it has the support of the hon. Member for Bristol South.
Karin Smyth: I am encouraged by the Minister’s remarks. I made a point about the comparison with Scotland, so will his review of the regulation look at and learn from the evidence from Scotland and, indeed, from Northern Ireland?

Mr Hurd: The short answer is yes. There has been a significant intervention in Scotland and it would be quite wrong for us not to consider the evidence. The scale and circumstances are obviously different, but it would be wrong for us to ignore it completely, as my predecessors have indicated.

In conclusion, if I have not already been clear, let me be quite clear now that the Government recognise that there are legitimate uses for air weapons such as shooting sports, which the hon. Lady also confirmed in her remarks, and that a balance needs to be struck between the freedom to pursue such interests and regulation or control. The existing controls on air weapons are helping to reduce their misuse and the occurrence of tragic accidents involving these weapons, but whenever accidents do occur—I have looked back on the roll call of tragic incidents, which often involve children—it is right to look again at the controls to see whether further changes are required or justified. As I said earlier, I intend to undertake a review of the regulation of air weapons in England and Wales to assess whether any further measures may be necessary to protect the public.

Let me close by again thanking the hon. Lady for securing this debate and for how she framed it. I hope that my remarks have satisfied her that the Government take this issue very seriously indeed.

Question put and agreed to.

10.24 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Middle Level Bill

Motion made.

That the promoters of the Middle Level Bill, which originated in this House in the previous Session on 24 January 2017, may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of bills).—(The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.)

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be considered on Tuesday 17 October at Four o’clock.

City of London Corporation (Open Spaces) Bill

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mental Health Workforce

1. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to increase the size of the mental health workforce. [010015]

Mr Hunt: Our plans envisage treating another 70,000 children every year by 2020-21, but that is still not enough. It will take us from one in four children needing help to one in three. That is why we are publishing a Green Paper on child and adolescent mental health.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): One of the staffing shortages is actually in children and young people’s services. In County Durham in my constituency, the waiting time for autism diagnosis is two years. I have raised this with the mental health trust and NHS England, but the problem seems to be with the clinical commissioning group. What can the Secretary of State do to ensure that the extra money that he has pledged to put into the service actually gets to the service?

Mr Hunt: I would like to thank the hon. Gentleman for speaking out about mental health, like so many colleagues in this House, which makes a massive difference to the Time2Change campaign. It is unacceptable for someone to be waiting that long, and I do not want to stand here and defend it. I will certainly look into the individual case that the hon. Gentleman raises, but the fact is that many Members will know of similar cases. The money is starting to get through to the frontline. It is not just money, though; it is also capacity, and having trained mental health therapists—nurses, psychiatrists—and that is why we are boosting their training, too.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): As someone who is married to an NHS psychiatrist, may I start by paying tribute to all those volunteers, carers and professionals working in mental health on World Mental Health Day? Has the Secretary of State seen today’s briefing by the Children’s Commissioner, highlighting the vital importance of prevention and early intervention? Will he set out what steps he is taking to support a growing workforce—volunteers and professionals—working in prevention and early intervention?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am aware of the report that she talks about. We know that half of mental health conditions become established before the age of 14, which is why early intervention is so important. In July, I announced an expansion in the mental health workforce—another 21,000 posts. A number of those will be in children’s mental health, to address the issues she raises.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Secretary of State may know that because of a reduction in the number of mental health clinicians in Cumbria, the Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust has now chosen to end consultant psychiatric call-out care from 8 pm to 9 am. It would have started last week, but it is going to start in the next two or three weeks. That means, as I am sure he is aware, that it will not be possible to section people under the Mental Health Acts between those hours unless they are within an NHS facility. People in police stations, people in care homes and people at A&E departments will not be—

Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make an application for an Adjournment debate, he can do that on a subsequent occasion. I think we have got the gravamen of his question.

Tim Farron: The question is: does the Secretary of State agree that that is not an appropriate use of resources, and will he provide the resources that are needed?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue. I will not go into it in detail now, but I will certainly look into it closely and get back to him, if I may. Obviously, it is very important.
23. [901029] Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): On World Mental Health Day, may I also welcome the progress the Government have made? We are doing all that we can to make changes. However, too many patients in my constituency, particularly younger patients, have to travel out of Eastleigh for the treatment they need, especially given the challenges facing Southern Health. Will the Secretary of State outline what he will be doing to right this wrong?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the issues around Southern Health, which will have directly affected a number of her constituents. That organisation is being turned around. However, she is also right to say that too many people are travelling out of area for their treatment. We have record numbers of children’s beds commissioned, but in the end this is about the capacity of the system of trained psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists, which was why we announced the extra 21,000 posts.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On World Mental Health Day, may I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for wearing yellow for #HelloYellow on behalf of our team?

The Secretary of State’s claim that thousands of extra mental health staff will be appointed by 2021 is fanciful unless he tells us how they will be funded. Today, the Care Quality Commission reports that mental health services are struggling to staff wards safely. We have also learned recently that two out of five mental health staff have been abused or attacked by patients in the past year. Most blame staff shortages for that violence. Rather than telling us about recruiting for 2021, what is the Secretary of State going to do today to protect staff from violence? 1

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Lady what has happened in mental health. Some 30,000 more people are working in mental health today than when her Government left office—a 5.8% increase in clinical staff. On top of that—she asked about money—we have committed an extra £1 billion a year by 2021 so that we can employ even more people. We are the first Government to admit that where we are now is not good enough. We want to be the best in the world; that is why we are investing to deliver that.

21. [901027] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Parental conflict is recognised as a key cause of children’s mental health problems. What is the Department doing to address that, and will Ministers be willing to meet a group of colleagues who supported the “Manifesto to Strengthen Families”? Its policy proposals seek to discuss how strengthening families can address children’s mental health problems.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Children who come from troubled or chaotic family backgrounds are far more likely to have mental health issues. I am more than happy to meet her and to feed her thoughts into our mental health Green Paper.

2. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What steps he is taking to broaden routes into nursing.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Developing new routes into nursing is a priority for my Department, which is why last week I announced plans to train 12,500 new nursing associates through the apprentice route in the next two years and to increase the number of nurses we train by 25%—the biggest increase in the history of the NHS.

Rachel Maclean: I welcome the fact that there are currently record numbers of nurses working in the NHS, but what is the Secretary of State doing to provide assurances to hospitals, such as the Alex in my constituency, that have faced issues with recruitment and retention? I very much welcome the new routes into nursing, including degree apprenticeships. What further actions does he propose to take?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. The Alex is going through a difficult period and I know that as the local MP she is giving it a lot of support. The fact is that in 2014 we turned down 37,000 applicants to nurse degree courses. That is why we think that we need to do much, much better in training a number of people who would make brilliant nurses. That was why we announced the big increase last week, which will help the Alex and many other hospitals.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): University admissions departments have reported an 8% fall in the number of people accepted on to nursing courses this autumn, so the situation is getting worse, not better as the Secretary of State claims. What contingency does he have in place, in the event that we crash out of the European Union, to address a further haemorrhaging of European Union staff from the NHS, and when will he review his disastrous decision to abolish nurse bursaries, which has had such a negative impact?

Mr Hunt: Let us be clear: we took the difficult decision on nurse bursaries precisely so that we could have the biggest expansion in nurse training places we have ever had. When we had the higher education reforms in 2011, which the right hon. Gentleman’s party opposed, we also saw a drop in initial applications, but then we saw them soaring to record levels. That is what we want to happen with nurses, because we need more nurses for the Royal Devon and Exeter, and all the hospitals that serve our constituents.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the apprenticeship route and the associate nurse route into nursing because living on a bursary of £400 a month is no fun, believe me. However, will the Secretary of State look at nurse training so that when nurses qualify they are able to take on courses such as venepuncture and cannulation as soon as possible? Many student nurses and newly qualified nurses are frustrated that they cannot be used in those roles.

Mr Hunt: I will certainly look into that. Of course, my hon. Friend understands this issue better than many in this House. The really exciting change is that it will now be possible for healthcare assistants who could make fantastic nurses to progress to being nurses without needing to take out student loans because they will be able to carry on earning while they learn. That will open up big opportunities for many people.
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Although we support moves to broaden access to nursing, these measures are effectively an admission that the scrapping of bursaries has been a disaster, but whatever recruitment strategies there are, the Government need to improve retention. The Royal College of Nursing recently reported that half of nurses surveyed said that “staff shortages are compromising care”. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that nurses can do their jobs properly right now?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is right to bring that up. One thing we can do a lot better is to improve the opportunities for flexible working. We have announced that we will be making new flexible working arrangements available to all NHS staff during this Parliament. We are also expanding programmes to encourage people who may have left the profession to come back into nursing.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I think everyone would welcome an expansion of nurse training places, but the Council of Deans of Health stated in June that no new extra places had been funded either in universities or, crucially, in hospitals, where 50% of the course is carried out. Will the Secretary of State clarify when that funding will be made available?

Mr Hunt: Next year.

Dr Whitford: Obviously we know that it takes quite some time to train a nurse, and one in 10 posts in England is vacant—that is twice the rate we face in Scotland. We also know that there is a 51% increase in nurses leaving the profession, a 96% drop in those coming from the European Union, and a limit on the use of agency staff, so where does the Secretary of State expect NHS England to find the 40,000 nurses it needs right now?

Mr Hunt: Let me just remind the hon. Lady that there are 11,300 more nurses on our wards than there were just four years ago, so we are increasing the number of nurses in the NHS. She mentions what is happening in Scotland. I gently remind her that nearly double the proportion of patients are waiting too long for their operations in Scotland as in England.

Mr Hunt: I support all universities that are trying to move into offering more courses that can help me to ensure that we have enough staff for the NHS. I am sure that the University of Gloucestershire’s bid will be powerful, but I am aware that other hon. Members are supporting bids from their own constituency—including, I have to say, that of the University of Surrey, which puts me in a somewhat difficult position.

Myopic Choroidal Neovascularisation: Eylea

3. Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): What his policy is on making Eylea available as a treatment for myopic choroidal neovascularisation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is developing guidance on the use of Eylea for the treatment of myopic CNV. NICE has published draft guidance for appeal that recommends use of the drug subject to a patient access scheme that makes it available to the NHS at a discounted price. NICE expects to publish final guidance this November.

Ian Austin: NICE needs to get a move on, because these drugs have been available to patients in Scotland and Wales, but patients in England will be going blind in the meantime.

Steve Brine: Obviously I would be deeply concerned if patients were losing their sight due to treatment not happening in a timely way. Dudley clinical commissioning group tells me that it has already made funding available for Eylea following consideration of the NICE evidence summary issued in June 2016. This is the first drug that we have appraised through the new fast-track process for treatments that demonstrate clear cost-effectiveness. Patients will have routine access to Eylea from 1 December onwards.

Dr Whitford: My colleague, Lord O’Shaughnessy, has asked the regulator to work with the clinical community to assess the associated risks and whether alternative treatments offer better outcomes for patients.

Transvaginal Mesh Implants

4. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency on transvaginal mesh implants.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): My colleague, Lord O’Shaughnessy, met the MHRA on 27 September to discuss this very important issue. The Department will have further discussions with NHS England on the support given to patients who have suffered due to this procedure and has asked the regulator to work with the clinical community to assess the associated risks and whether alternative treatments offer better outcomes for patients.

Paul Masterton: Thousands of women across the country, including my constituent Elaine Holmes, the co-founder of the Scottish Mesh Survivors group, have to live with the catastrophic consequences of transvaginal mesh implants. With health regulators across the globe now waking up to the scandal and issuing alerts or deregistering mesh devices, will Ministers join me in urging the MHRA immediately to reclassify this damaging procedure as high risk?
Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this area. I fully sympathise with anyone who has suffered complications as a result of these devices, but we do not currently have enough evidence to warrant our asking the MHRA to reclassify these procedures, and this is a view shared by other regulators across the world. I can advise him, however, that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence strongly recommends that mesh implants not be routinely offered for the first surgical intervention on prolapse. That guidance is being updated—publication is due at the start of the new year—and will include an overarching document that looks in depth at the devices and the conditions surrounding the need for them, as well as the treatment of complications, to support better health outcomes.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): A constituent came to my surgery to explain how this has impacted on her life. It is truly harrowing. I understand that NHS England has set up 17 regional teams to look into this. I want to be able to assure my constituent that the voice of women and how this is impacting on will be considered. I would be grateful if the Minister could respond so that we might understand what the future holds.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am absolutely aware that many women experience substantial side effects and complications following this procedure. Equally, however, many women also experience considerable relief from symptoms. We need a good review of the evidence to make sure that we adopt this procedure only when it fully suits women and that women understand the risks associated with the procedure. But I fully sympathise with the hon. Lady’s constituent.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is deeply worrying, though, that this procedure was introduced with so little evidence to support it. I think we all have to agree it has led to unacceptable complication rates for certain products. Will the Minister heed the words of Professor Heneghan and hold a public inquiry into the numbers of women adversely affected and why the safety of so many women was disregarded?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I say again that many women have received relief from their symptoms following this procedure, but we need more evidence before we can properly review it, so it is important that we allow NICE to undertake its work so that we can take a clear view. Any procedure comes with risk—no surgery is without it—but obviously the more evidence we can gather, the better we can advise women of those risks.

Five Year Forward View for Mental Health

5. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What plans has he for the implementation of the NHS’s five year forward view for mental health. [901010]

14. Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): What plans he has for the implementation of the NHS’s Five Year Forward View for Mental Health. [901019]
health. Given that children throughout the country are routinely waiting for months to start their treatment, may I ask what progress the Government are making with the introduction of a maximum waiting time standard for children’s mental health?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** The right hon. Gentleman has raised an excellent point. Our Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health will address exactly those issues. We have made clear that we will tackle mental health through early intervention, and early intervention for children and young people is central to that.

**Mr Dunne:** As the hon. Lady will know, we have inserted payment for extra activity into the contract for community pharmacists because we want more activities to take place in community pharmacies. For example, many flu vaccinations throughout the country are now being carried out by pharmacists.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank the Minister for the recent meeting that he had with me and other colleagues about Grimsby Hospital, which is in special measures. It was clear from a recent meeting I had with the chief executive that staff vacancies are one of the biggest problems preventing the hospital from getting out of special measures. What additional support can the Department offer in order to get the hospital back on track?

**Mr Dunne:** I was pleased to welcome my hon. Friend to a meeting a few days ago to discuss the situation, together with his Opposition constituency neighbours. One of the things that we will be looking at in the coming weeks is the allocation of the new doctor training places. As part of the criteria, we will be looking to ensure that some of those places are allocated to areas where it is difficult to recruit, such as rural and coastal areas.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The Minister has visited Kettering General Hospital and knows the wonderful work that the doctors and nurses there do. The problem that the hospital faces, however, is that too many of the doctors and nurses are full-time permanent staff, and too many locums are being hired, at great expense to the hospital budget. What is my hon. Friend’s advice for Kettering hospital on tackling the issue?

**Mr Dunne:** When I visited Kettering General Hospital we discussed excessive agency staff costs. One of the measures announced last week by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was a drive to invest more in both regional and local bank agencies within the NHS so that we can reduce the reliance on more expensive agency staff.

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**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve end-of-life care.

**Mr Dunne:** I was pleased to welcome my hon. Friend to a meeting a few days ago to discuss the situation, together with his Opposition constituency neighbours. One of the things that we will be looking at in the coming weeks is the allocation of the new doctor training places. As part of the criteria, we will be looking to ensure that some of those places are allocated to areas where it is difficult to recruit, such as rural and coastal areas.

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Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I know that she, through her role on the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care, will continue to hold me to account on these commitments. We did look at the work undertaken by Together for Short Lives to improve end-of-life care for children, which does require special attention—she is quite right to raise that. NHS England recently co-hosted a policy summit with Together for Short Lives, and I will be meeting it next week to discuss that further. We are also engaging local sustainability and transformation partnerships to support planning for end-of-life care, and helping all trusts to develop and improve their services. This work is ongoing, but it remains a key priority.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): When it comes to baby loss, the end of life can often be sudden and unexpected. In this Baby Loss Awareness Week, will the Minister join me in welcoming the launch of the national bereavement care pathway, and pay tribute to Sands, baby loss organisations and charities, the APPG and the former Care Quality Minister, Ben Gummer, who did so much to make it happen?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am of course happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating those organisations and thank him for all the work that he has done. The 11 pilots launched only last month are very much down to the work undertaken by Together for Short Lives to improve end-of-life care for children, which does require special attention—she is quite right to raise that. NHS England recently co-hosted a policy summit with Together for Short Lives, and I will be meeting it next week to discuss that further. We are also engaging local sustainability and transformation partnerships to support planning for end-of-life care, and helping all trusts to develop and improve their services. This work is ongoing, but it remains a key priority.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Many people would prefer to die at home, but that is actually very difficult to achieve, not only because of the lack of support for Macmillan nurses, for example, but because, frankly, of the reluctance of the authorities to effect a speedy transition to a home base. What can the Government do to ensure that dying at home is a real option?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman is quite right: many people would elect to die at home, if the opportunity were available. We need to ensure provision to allow people to do that, if that is their choice, because we should be supporting people to honour their choices at the end of their lives, and it enables us to treat more people in hospitals and hospices.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Hospices, such as Treetops Hospice Care in my constituency, provide outstanding end-of-life care. Although these services benefit from generous charitable donations that enable them to operate on a day-to-day basis, what more can the Government do to help support hospices when capital investment is needed to improve the current setting of new build?

Jackie Doyle-Price: One of the strengths of our hospice movement is that it relies heavily on charitable donations, which shows that people are generous and that they want to support good, locally focussed care. However, CCGs should look at where they can support hospices with their care costs, and we will certainly consider including that in the end-of-life care programme.

Public Sector Pay Cap: NHS Staffing Levels

8. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the public sector pay cap on staffing levels in the NHS. [901013]

11. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the public sector pay cap on staffing levels in the NHS. [901016]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): NHS staff do a fantastic job in tough circumstances, and pay restraint has been challenging for many of them. However, given the financial pressures, it is also true that the NHS would not have been able to recruit an additional 30,000 staff since May 2010 without the cap.

Christian Matheson: The NHS is short of 3,500 midwives and 40,000 nurses. What proportion of those numbers does the Secretary of State put down to the public sector pay cap?

Mr Hunt: As I said in my previous answer, without pay restraint we would not have 11,300 more doctors in the NHS and 11,300 more nurses on our wards. The hon. Gentleman will know that we recognise that it was not sustainable to carry on with the 1% rise going forward, which is why we have been given the leeway to have more flexible negotiations next year.

Marsha De Cordova: Hospital wards and GP surgeries are chronically understaffed, and the knock-on effect is that waiting lists are spiralling out of control. Is it not in the best interests of patients to scrap the pay cap so that the NHS can be run with the relevant number of staff in place?

Mr Hunt: I welcome what I think is my first question from the hon. Lady. Lady, and I can give her some good news: the pay cap has been scrapped.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): In the work that I have done in hospitals, staff have told me that they are most unhappy about too much reliance on temporary staff, rota gaps and not feeling valued, as opposed to issues around pay. The latter—not feeling valued—often goes hand in hand with poor management practices. What is my right hon. Friend doing about those causes of staff unhappiness?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend, who has a lot of experience of working in the NHS, is absolutely right. The new Care Quality Commission inspection regime is designed precisely to identify good, strong leadership, because that has the best impact on staff and, through that, the best impact on patients.

Drug Treatment Services

9. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the advice of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs on the level of funding for drug treatment services. [901014]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): We thank the ACMD for its report, and we take its advice seriously. Discussions will happen across Government, and we will respond fully in due course in the usual way.
Jeff Smith: The ACMD says: “England had built a world class drug treatment system... This system is now being dismantled due to reductions in resources.” More than 100 local authorities have had to reduce spending on addiction services this year as a result of Government cuts. Will that reduction in addiction treatment budgets not just cost the NHS more in the long term?

Steve Brine: The Government are already investing £16 billion in public health services over the spending review period. We made it a condition of the public health grant that local authorities have regard to the need to improve the take-up and outcomes of their drug and alcohol services. Local authorities are best placed to make those decisions. The investment in effective services means that the average waiting time is just three days and, according to our monitoring systems, treatment outcomes in Greater Manchester are generally better than or in line with the rest of England.

Mental Health: Education

10. Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on promoting improved education in schools and youth settings to tackle the stigma associated with mental health. [901015]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Ahead of our autumn Green Paper on children and young people's mental health, we are having productive discussions with the Department for Education on the vital role that schools can play in tackling both mental health problems and the stigma surrounding them.

Mary Glindon: The YMCA and NHS's #IAMWHOLES campaign, which was launched this morning, shows that young people seeking help are often dismissed by those around them, largely due to a lack of understanding of mental health difficulties. Will the Secretary of State meet the YMCA to discuss what can be done to combat the stigma?

Mr Hunt: I am more than happy to meet the YMCA. I also want to point out the amazing work done by the “Time2Change” campaign. I was at an event to mark its 10th anniversary, and I heard from young people who have spoken up about their mental health conditions, which takes a lot of courage. Things are changing, and we can draw a lot of hope from what is happening on the ground.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Family doctors undertake such work, but why have only a quarter of them had any formal training in mental health?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that a GP is often the first point of contact for many people. What are we doing? Three thousand mental health professionals will be seconded to GP surgeries over the next few years to give GPs the back-up they need in that area.

Mr Speaker: Not for the first time, I implore the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) to issue to colleagues his textbook on succinct questions.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Since the demand for children and youth mental health services far outstrips supply, will the Secretary of State consider diverting resources to voluntary bodies, such as the admirable Off The Record in my constituency, which have a much lower threshold for referral?

Mr Hunt: We will look at the role of voluntary organisations, and I totally agree with the right hon. Gentleman that they have an incredibly important role to play. We must also consider the role of schools, because teachers are extremely enthusiastic to do more around mental health. I think that if we give them more support there is a lot more they could do.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that when it comes to physical health and stigma, the Department will react right away. Do the Government now recognise the importance of treating mental health with equal status to physical health?

Mr Hunt: We absolutely recognise that and we have legislated for it. The children and mental health Green Paper will take further steps in that direction.

Bournville Gardens Health and Community Medical Centre

12. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): What progress has been made on the Bournville gardens health and community medical centre project in Birmingham. [901017]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): The building of the new health and wellbeing centre is supported by NHS England for funding in principle through the estates and technology transformation fund, subject to due diligence checks including a value for money exercise.

Richard Burden: That is fine, but is it not the case that although approval was given by the NHS technology and transformation fund last autumn, NHS England has spent the past 18 months negotiating new procedures for the premises cost directions? The delays in those procedures are jeopardising things such as that health and wellbeing centre. Is it not time that Ministers stepped in to ensure that projects on which everyone agrees can be approved under existing regulations and should not have to wait for the renegotiations?

Steve Brine: The hon. Gentleman is right that NHS England has been negotiating changes to the premises cost directions, which govern how we manage premises costs for general practitioners, but that is not the reason for the delay. We are working through the detail of the content of the scheme and it is not yet at the point of seeking approval. At the end of the day, this is public money and I think that the hon. Gentleman and everybody in this House would expect me to make sure that things are done properly.

Congenital Heart Services: North-West

13. Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of provision of congenital heart services in the north-west. [901018]
The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): As the hon. Lady knows, the adult congenital heart disease service provided in Manchester has been included in the long-standing clinical assessment of CHD services undertaken by NHS England, which is now reviewing the more than 7,500 responses to the public consultation, which ended in July. The adult CHD service in Manchester was suspended by the trust in June, when the only CHD surgeon left. Hospitals in Leeds and Newcastle continue to deliver level 1 care and paediatric CHD services continue to be provided by Alder Hey Children’s Hospital in Liverpool.

Lucy Powell: Is not the truth behind what happened that Ministers and NHS England prejudged the review and therefore left services untenable and unviable in Manchester? There are no level 1 adult congenital heart services anywhere in the north-west and patients are having to travel to Leeds and Newcastle for the treatment. Will the Minister apologise today to those patients for this botched review, which has left patients with a great deal of uncertainty and has meant that they have had to travel huge distances?

Mr Dunne: I am sure that the hon. Lady will not want to confuse her patients by suggesting that relying on a single surgeon for prolonged periods is necessarily in their best interests. The facilities that remain in Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust are intended to remain and include CHD outpatient services for adults and children. Level 2 services also continue to be provided in Manchester.

Unmet Social Care Needs

15. Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate he has made of the number of people living with unmet social care needs.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): By passing the Care Act 2014, this Government established a national eligibility threshold that defines the care needs that local authorities are required to meet. This eliminates the postcode lottery of eligibility across England. Social care continues to be a key priority for this Government. That is why local authorities in England will receive an additional £2 billion for social care over the next three years. In the longer term, we are committed to establishing adult social care on a fair and more sustainable basis.

Preet Kaur Gill: Age UK estimates that nearly 1.2 million older people have unmet care needs. After the Government dropped their disastrous dementia tax policy during the general election, all they can offer people is yet another consultation. In the words of the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Committee, is it not time the Government just got “on with it”?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do not recognise Age UK’s assessment of unmet need. As I said, the requirements are enshrined in statute and local authorities should be held to that. In response to the hon. Lady’s final point, let me say that we are getting on with it, but we need a real cultural change in how we tackle these issues. There is a long-term issue to address in the fact that we are all living longer. This is not just going to need a sticking plaster; we will need to take the public with us. So this is not just another consultation; it is a vehicle for making sure that we as a society tackle this issue once and for all.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust was put into special measures last week, but delayed discharge caused by unmet social care needs contributes to the pressure in the trust. I welcome the £12 million that was awarded to the council this April to address that, but what more can the Minister do to help to relieve the pressure? Will he meet me and my Cornish colleagues to discuss the healthcare challenges faced in Cornwall and on Scilly?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has visited twice in the past year, and the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) is more than willing to meet my hon. Friend next week, with other colleagues.

Clinical Commissioning Groups and Local Authorities

16. Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of co-operation between clinical commissioning groups and local authorities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): The Government want and expect strong relationships and joint working between the NHS and local authorities to make a success of STPs. They are meant to be a one-system solution.

Robert Neill: The London Borough of Bromley has had considerable success in joint working with its clinical commissioning group, through joint appointments, a multi-agency use of funding and a complete sign-up from the council, but we are concerned that reorganisation may detract from this operation at the local level. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss Bromley’s proposals to build on the success it has had so far?

Steve Brine: We are confident that we have some of the best STP leaders in place. I was looking last night at the figures for south-east London, and I saw that my hon. Friend’s local STP is highly rated, both on leadership and overall. I was thinking about him in the gym last night and I thought he might say what he did, so let me say that I am very happy to meet him and to broker a meeting between him and the NHS.

Mr Speaker: It is interesting to hear about the thoughts of the hon. Gentleman when he is on the treadmill or the exercise bike—it is always useful to have a bit of additional information.

20. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite co-operation between the CCG and the local authority, we have had severe rationing and cuts and a seriously underfunded mental health service: the funding formula is seriously failing the health economy in York. In particular, the capped expenditure process will make it far, far worse. Instead of just slashing budgets, will the Secretary of State meet me to understand York’s health economy and to put real solutions in place?
Steve Brine: I am always happy to meet Members, including the hon. Lady in order to talk about York. As the shadow Secretary of State said, the STP proposals are not about Tory cuts; they are about redesigning services in the local area. So I am happy to meet her to talk about her area.

Topical Questions

T1. [900887] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This week is Baby Loss Awareness Week, and the whole House will want to mark the tragedy faced by too many parents every year by redoubling our efforts to reduce avoidable baby death and harm. I am pleased to tell the House that to mark World Mental Health Day today the entire Cabinet was this morning briefed by two of the country’s leading mental health experts, Poppy Jaman and Professor Sir Simon Wessely, on our plans announced today to roll out mental health first aid to 1 million people in England.

Mr Cunningham: Can the Secretary of State tell us what progress has been made regarding an inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely tell the hon. Gentleman the answer to that; we have been making very important progress with families over the summer; and we have decided the shape of the inquiry and the leadership of the inquiry and all the factors around the terms of reference need to be decided in close consultation with the affected families. So we are keen to get on as quickly as possible, but we have made some progress in understanding their wishes.

T4. [900890] Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Oesophageal cancer is one of the most aggressive cancers with some of the lowest survival rates. Early symptoms are frequently masked with over-the-counter heartburn remedies. Will the Secretary of State consider meeting manufacturers and charities such as Barrett’s Wessex in my Southampton, Itchen constituency to develop a clear warning on packaging to encourage regular users of heartburn remedies to seek medical advice about their condition?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I thank one of my constituency neighbours for that question. Improving outcomes for all cancers is one of my main priorities in this job. I visited the Christie hospital in Manchester last week to see the progress being made on the proton beam therapy facility there. I know Barratt’s Wessex in my hon. Friend’s constituency, as it also does work with some of my constituents. We must do better on these rarer cancers with poor outcomes. I will look at what BW does exactly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently remind Ministers that answers from the Front Bench must be very brief during topical questions, because many other colleagues are waiting to contribute and I do not want to disappoint them, as that would be unfair.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Secretary of State tell us how many elective operations he expects to be cancelled by 31 December?

Mr Hunt: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that every year over Christmas time, when we know that hospitals will be busy, we suspend elective care in particularly busy places. That is how we keep patients safe.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer, but already more than 80,000 elective operations have been cancelled. That is an increase on the past year. A&E attendance is up on the past year, bed occupancy is higher than last year and the Care Quality Commission has today warned that the NHS is straining at the seams. Winter is coming. Last week, the Tory party made spending commitments worth £15 billion, but not 1p extra for the NHS, so will the NHS fare worse or better than last year this winter, or are we set for another winter crisis made in Downing Street?

Mr Hunt: What the CQC actually said this morning is that the majority of health and care systems across the NHS are providing good or outstanding quality; that the safety of care is going up; and that performance is improving. None the less, the hon. Gentleman is right that we are always concerned about winter. Let me tell him the new things that are happening this year to help prepare the NHS: £1 billion more going into the social care system in the most recent Budget; a £100 million capital programme for A&E departments; 2,400 beds being freed up; and an increasing number of clinicians at 111 call centres. A lot is happening, but, overall, let me remind him that our NHS is seeing 1,800 more people every single day within four hours—that is something to celebrate.

T7. [900893] Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Minister will be aware that clinical commissioning groups and the London region are currently consulting on changes to governance and commissioning arrangements. Given the positive words already said about arrangements in Bromley, will my right hon. Friend confirm that no changes of any kind will undermine the accountability at a local level, or the ability to commission locally in Bromley?

Mr Hunt: I can confirm that because the legal accountability, whatever co-operation arrangements are made, will stay exactly the same.

T2. [900888] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): My hospital trust tells me that there are no open or distance learning courses available anywhere to train new nurses. Considering the number of local people who are keen to be trained and the barriers that face them, will the Secretary of State agree to have a chinwag with me to solve this problem in Bassetlaw?

Mr Hunt: That is a very attractive offer, and I am always happy to have a chinwag with the hon. Gentleman. Last week, we announced something that I hope will resolve that, which is that we are looking at holding nurse training courses on-site in hospital and community sites so that experienced healthcare assistants do not have to go to a higher education institution to do their training.
T9. [900895] Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The last Labour Government downgraded Frenchay hospital in my constituency. My constituents and I have been waiting for several years for the much-needed and much-promised community hospital. What action are the Government taking to ensure that that finally happens?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for Frenchay hospital and keeps it uppermost in our minds. The way in which we are looking at the pattern of health provision for the next period is through the STP process, and I encourage him to engage with the STP leadership in his area and make the case for Frenchay hospital.

T3. [900889] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The palliative care we provide to terminally ill children is an incredibly serious topic. I want to refer to the point made by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and to press the Minister on giving children’s care parity of funding with adult care. Will she follow the example of the Scottish Government and provide parity of funding?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): As I previously advised the House, I am in conversation with Together for Short Lives to look at how we improve palliative care for children. This clearly raises a different set of circumstances and sensitivities, and it is essential that we do our best for these children.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Do Ministers have any plans to review the “do not resuscitate” guidance for hospitals? I have a constituent who has such an order placed on him, despite the fact that he has left hospital and is in a care home, it cannot be rescinded and his family have not consented.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Certainly, in CQC inspections in the past, the whole issue of “do not resuscitate” orders has been an area of concern. This is something we will very much look at as part of the end of life policy, but I would like to hear more about the case my hon. Friend mentioned, if he would like to write to me.

T5. [900891] Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Accountable care systems are a systemic change to the way the NHS will be managed and a significant step towards an Americanised care system, so will the Minister explain why NHS England is having a fundamental reorganisation take place under the radar without a national consultation?

Mr Hunt: Accountable care systems are supported by such rabid right wingers as Polly Toynbee, writing in The Guardian, because they are about health systems coming together to co-operate to give the best care for patients. That is what is happening across the NHS, and it is already delivering great results.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): This Friday marks Secondary Breast Cancer Awareness Day. In 2015, the Government recognised that data collection for this type of cancer was not good enough. However, research by Breast Cancer Care shows that less than a third of trusts collect the number of people diagnosed with secondary breast cancer. Will the Minister confirm what actions the Government are taking to ensure that all trusts are collecting this information, given its importance to improving outcomes?

Steve Brine: I thank the co-chair of the all-party group on breast cancer in what is BCAM—Breast Cancer Awareness Month. We must never forget the treatment and support we give to those living with and beyond the cancer diagnosis. We must always remember those living with secondary breast cancer and the work of the third sector—brilliant charities such as Breast Cancer Haven and Breast Cancer Care—so that we can focus on access to a specialist nurse. As my hon. Friend says, the collection of data is critical, and I will be discussing that at my roundtable with some of the main players in the cancer community later this week.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Will the Minister abolish the patient penalty and scrap hospital car parking charges, which punish both the sick and hard-working NHS staff, as well as causing problems for residents living adjacent to NHS hospitals, such as Peterlee Community Hospital in my constituency?

Mr Hunt: I do understand the concerns raised, and all hospitals are under a responsibility to make sure that they have proper arrangements in place for people on low incomes and people who have to visit hospitals regularly.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Antibiotic resistance is a major threat to humanity. Will the Minister outline the progress we have made in opening up the £50 million global antimicrobial resistance innovation fund to applications?

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend for that. We expect the first launch to be the bilateral UK-China partnership £10 million fund, which we expect to go live early in 2018. Further information on the calls for the remaining £40 million will be announced in due course.

T10. [900896] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): In the light of the latest statistics from the Office for National Statistics showing a record number of drug-related deaths registered in England and Wales, will the Minister meet members of the drugs, alcohol and justice parliamentary group to discuss this issue and see how it can be addressed?

Steve Brine: I am very happy to meet the group, and the hon. Lady should contact my office. The Home Office is the lead Department for cross-governmental drugs policy, and we obviously released the new cross-Government drugs strategy earlier this year. However, this cannot all be about drugs services and picking up the pieces after things have gone wrong; it can also be about prevention. We should, as somebody once said at this Dispatch Box, understand a little more and condemn a little less.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): This month is Stoptober, and someone who manages to stop smoking for 28 days is five times more likely to quit for good.
Legislation is obviously part of this, but perhaps the Minister could update us on what more could be done.

**Steve Brine:** At the last health oral questions, I committed to publishing the new tobacco control plan. I did that on 18 July. We have had a lot of legislation, from this and the previous Government. It is Stoptober, and there has never been a better time to quit. We now need to take that legislation, work with the control plan the Government have published and work it through local authorities and smoking cessation services, because my hon. Friend is absolutely right that where buddyng services are used, we have better outcomes.

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab):** There is a crisis in mental health staffing levels. Does the Secretary of State accept that today, throughout the country, there are 2,000 fewer mental health nurses than there were when he took charge five years ago?

**Mr Hunt:** What I accept is that we have 30,000 more professionals working in mental health than when my Government came into office. There has been a decline in the number of mental health nurses, but we have in place plans to train 8,000 more mental health nurses, and that will make a big difference.1

**Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con):** The Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust capital expenditure bid would fund a 24-hour urgent care service, and it would also increase bed capacity and improve hospital performance in Gloucester and Cheltenham, to the benefit of patients throughout the county. When do Ministers expect to announce the results of the bid? Will they take this particular bid into careful consideration?

**Mr Dunne:** I am aware that, under the Gloucestershire STP, a proposal has been submitted for capital funding to support plans to improve the clinical environment for patients and staff at the Gloucestershire Royal Hospital. I am afraid that my hon. Friend will have to join me in awaiting the Chancellor’s announcement in the Budget as to whether there will be a second phase of capital funding for STPs. If there is any funding, it will be allocated thereafter.

**Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab):** GPs in my constituency tell me that because of changes to personal data rules they will no longer be able to charge for providing reports for private insurance and legal claims. Will Ministers update the House on the situation? What assessment has been made of how GPs will cope with the additional costs they will face?

**Mr Hunt:** I am happy to look into that matter and write to the hon. Lady. Lady.

**Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab):** If nurses or other NHS staff are awarded a pay rise above the current pay cap, will the Government fund that pay rise fully, or will they require it to be met by cuts in patient services?

**Mr Hunt:** That is something I cannot answer right now, because the latitude that the Chancellor has given me with respect to the negotiation of future pay rises is partly linked to productivity improvements that we will negotiate at the same time. The fact is, though, that we do have that flexibility, and I hope we can get a win-win as a result.

**Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab):** May I take the Secretary of State back to the issue of nursing associates? Given that evidence shows that for every 25 patients for whom a professionally qualified nurse is replaced by a non-nurse, mortality on an average ward rises by 21%, how comfortable is he with reports that hospitals in Lincolnshire and Leicester are using nursing associates to plug gaps in the nursing workforce?

**Mr Hunt:** The hon. Lady should be very careful before talking down nurse associates. They do a fantastic job, they are trained, they are helping our NHS and they are welcomed by their nursing colleagues.

**Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab):** Under this Government, there has been an unprecedented fall in the number of nurses: the NHS is short of 40,000 nurses and more than 6,000 have gone since 2010, under this Conservative Government. When will the Secretary of State acknowledge that he is failing the NHS and failing patients, and when will he do something about it?

**Mr Hunt:** With respect, I really think the hon. Gentleman needs to get his facts right. The number of nurses has gone up, not down, since this Government have been in office. The number of nurses in our hospitals has gone up by more than 11,000, because this Government are supporting safer care in all our hospitals.

**John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab):** The number of unfilled nursing posts in London is now more than 10,000—whatever the Secretary of State’s figures say, it is more than 10,000. When will they be filled?

**Mr Hunt:** When we have put through the biggest increase in nurse training places in the history of the NHS—the 25% increase that I announced last week.

**Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD):** Suicide is the most common cause of death for men under the age of 45, and men are significantly less likely than women to seek support from loved ones or medical professionals when they have mental health problems. How can services be better targeted at men to encourage them to seek help more quickly and thereby reduce misery?

**Mr Hunt:** This is a very important issue and the hon. Lady is right to raise it. The Time to Change campaign has said that this year it will focus on men, specifically to try to address the issues she mentioned. We are rolling out crisis plans throughout the country to make sure we are better able to reach people who reach out to us.

**Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** What reassurance can the Secretary of State give to the Amplify youth project in Northwich in my constituency that timely and improved access to mental health services will be provided?

**Mr Hunt:** We have said that by 2020-21 we want to be treating an extra 70,000 young people every year, but the truth is that that is still not enough. We need to

bring down waiting times much more dramatically, which is why we are doing a lot of work across Government and we have a Green Paper coming out shortly.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Newly released NHS guidance makes it clear that walk-in services can have a future as part of urgent treatment centres. Does the Secretary of State agree with me and thousands of patients in Bury North that Bury walk-in centre can, should and must stay open and that Bury CCG should ensure this when it concludes its review?

Mr Dunne: Current plans by NHS England to look at the urgent and emergency care pathways include creating 150 urgent treatment centres by the end of this year. I am happy for the hon. Gentleman to write to me about Bury and will respond in due course.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that there is widespread support in the House for his Government’s commitment to enact the principle of deemed consent for organ donation? He knows from a previous meeting that my private Member’s Bill is due for its Second Reading early in the new year. Will he therefore agree to an early meeting now, so that we can co-ordinate the two and see how to advance his intentions? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) will be with me again and, with the Secretary of State’s commitment to this, we look forward to an early meeting.

Mr Hunt: I very much enjoyed our previous meeting, which was not so very long ago. I hope the hon. Gentleman is happy that we have made good progress since that meeting, with the Prime Minister announcing that we will start a consultation, but I am always happy to see him and his colleague the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis).

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that he and he alone has responsibilities under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to deal with referrals from local authorities of clinical commissioning group decisions. Almost a year ago, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Staffordshire County Council referred a matter to the Minister regarding the closure of community care beds. To date we have had no response. Letters from me and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) have gone unanswered. When will we get a response? Is this a case of wilful indifference towards his responsibilities or just ignorance of the Act?

Mr Hunt: May I apologise to the hon. Gentleman if he has not had a prompt reply to any letters to me or my Department? I will look into the issue that he raises and ensure that he gets a rapid response.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Yesterday the private ambulance service that provided non-urgent patient transport at Bedford hospital ceased trading, leaving the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust to pick up the pieces. Will the Minister order an inquiry to establish what went wrong, and does he agree that using private companies to run key services for our NHS is simply not working?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that private and independent providers of patient transport services provide services all across the country and support the ambulance services in that work. I will look into the case that he raises in relation to Bedford and write to him.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): All of the local dementia and rehabilitation beds in my rural constituency of High Peak are earmarked for closure. In some cases, patients and their families will have to travel 25 miles across the moors to Chesterfield. Given the importance of staff being able to work with families to support patients to return home, will the Minister agree to look again at such decisions, which make this work practically impossible?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady will be aware that the STP plans being considered for her area include providing more services in the community by community nurses and other nurses in our community hospitals being reassigned, which will allow them to undertake care for more patients than they can at present within community hospitals.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must move on. Demand invariably tends to exceed supply.
BAE Systems Military Air & Information Sites: Job Losses

12.38 pm

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if she will make a statement on the likelihood of over 1,000 jobs being lost across the north of England at BAE Systems Military Air & Information sites.

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry): I know that the Government, and indeed all of us, are disappointed to hear the news that BAE Systems is considering reductions of up to 1,400 staff in its military air and information business, 375 in its maritime services division and 150 in its applied intelligence business. This is a concerning time for those working for BAE Systems, particularly in the run-up to Christmas. That is why I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government stand ready to support fully those affected. Indeed, colleagues across the Ministry of Defence, my Department and others are reviewing what support we can offer the company as it goes through this process. Of course, the Department for Work and Pensions is also standing by to provide whatever advice or support is required.

I would like to set out three main points. First, I will provide an update on the process; secondly, I will explain the rationale for the changes; and thirdly, I will set out what the Government are doing to support BAE Systems and this vital sector with our business. The company will now enter a 30-day statutory consultation process, and no final decisions will be taken about the level or type of redundancies until that process is complete. The Government will continue to work with BAE Systems to ensure that compulsory redundancies are kept to a minimum, and the company assures us that the reductions will be managed on a voluntary basis as far as possible. I emphasise that, as is usual in such cases, the DWP rapid response team is engaged and standing by, ready to deploy. It is incredibly important that the skills that people in the workforce have built up are retained in the UK industry as far as possible. That is why we will be using the talent retention system that was designed by my Department, working with the sector, to ensure that vital skills are not lost to the UK.

I turn now to the rationale for the announcement. The House should be absolutely clear that BAE Systems has taken this decision as a result of normal business practice. The decision is the result of internal restructuring and a drive to transform its business so that it can continue to be one of our most efficient and effective companies, generating export orders across the world. This is not related to any UK defence spending decisions. [Interruption.] Labour Members can shout all they like, but I hope that we can avoid getting politics into this. It was very striking how during conference speech Labour Members—not the hon. Gentleman opposite me, for whom I have great respect—went out of their way to criticise the industry that we are talking about. I suggest that we calm down and think about the people affected and what we can do to support them.

In the last year, the Ministry of Defence has spent almost £4 billion with BAE Systems, as part of the £18 billion—half of which is spent in the manufacturing sector—that we spend across Government buying products and services from UK industry. We continually bang the drum and lead the charge for our world-leading defence industry right across the globe, maximising export opportunities for companies such as BAE Systems and the thousands of people employed in their supply chains. Indeed, only last month the Defence Secretary signed a statement of intent with Qatar to buy 24 Typhoons and six Hawks from BAE Systems. This is extremely positive news, and it demonstrates continued confidence globally in Britain’s defence and aerospace industry. We will continue to work with BAE Systems to maximise opportunities for the Typhoon and the Hawk training aircraft, and the Type 26 global combat ship, in markets such as Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Belgium, Finland, Canada and Australia.

In conclusion, we absolutely understand that this is a worrying time for those affected. We are determined to do all we can to support BAE Systems’ future export opportunities, and I stand ready to meet workers, unions or MPs who are concerned about the potential impact of the announcement in their constituencies.

Mr Hendrick: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. Today’s announcement by BAE Systems has come as a huge blow to thousands of workers and their families across Lancashire in the run-up to Christmas. The majority of Lancashire MPs have today written to the Prime Minister seeking immediate action and offering to establish a taskforce to avert the disaster. We ask the Minister for a swift, meaningful and positive response to our request.

What intermediate and longer-term actions are the Government taking to win contracts around the globe, to fly the flag and to sell the Eurofighter Typhoon and the Hawk? That is essential to sustaining the UK’s leading-edge technology and sovereign capability, as well as highly skilled jobs and the massive supply chain in the north-west of England. In order to maintain a leading edge, we must look to the future. BAE Systems has taken a big step by developing a £12 million academy in Lancashire. Will the Government play their role and announce an industrial strategy for aerospace, as they have done with shipbuilding, and will they commit themselves to assisting BAE Systems to develop a sixth-generation manned fighter aircraft?

With my right hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr Hoyle) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones), I met Prime Minister Cameron to urge him to secure vital contracts with Japan and India. We were assured that there was good news on the horizon, but there clearly was not. The Minister mentioned Qatar and that is obviously positive, but it is nothing like the size of the other contracts. Lancashire builds the finest because we have the best workforce in the world. We do not want to be let down again, so I ask the Minister to use her good offices to impress on the Prime Minister the major concerns of Lancashire MPs and indeed of MPs from across the House.

Claire Perry: I commend the hon. Gentleman and many of his colleagues for their absolutely resolute support both for the company and the sector. Of course...
I would be delighted to meet the taskforce, and I think we should extend the offer to the workers and unions affected. It is absolutely clear that we need maximum communication about the process, or to encourage the company to ensure maximum communication, particularly at this worrying time.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Government have a vital part to play in banging the drum for British exports. I have mentioned the Qatar statement of intent, and clearly there are ongoing conversations with countries, such as Saudi Arabia, that have expressed an interest in this technology. There is an appetite around the world for this technology. For every unit that is sold, the whole provision—supply and maintenance—will have a measurable impact on the work available for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and those of other Members.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the industrial strategy for this sector. We are very keen—we are already having conversations about this with the aerospace sector—on a bespoke sector deal. He will know that we have worked with the industry, on initiatives such as the technology for the future combat air system, to set out what we need to do both across this export-facing part of the business and right across the supply chain to ensure we have the right level of investment and skills.

Mr Speaker: I call the good doctor—Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): When BAE Systems says to the Government that this is normal business practice, will the Government reply to BAE Systems by reminding it that it is not a normal business, because it enjoys a near monopoly position in many parts of the British defence procurement structure? Will they therefore extract from BAE Systems a promise to work closely with the Government to examine to what extent any streamlining is really necessary and to what extent it can be ameliorated by common action, bearing in mind the special treatment that BAE Systems so often receives from the United Kingdom Government?

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is right to remind us that we spend almost £4 billion in procuring products and services from BAE Systems. Again, if we want to have a globally competitive, highly efficient bastion of success in this vital industry, it is really important to allow the company to go through its management processes. Of course we want to procure from BAE Systems, but we also procure from a wide range of other suppliers. It would be wrong for the Government to try to interfere in business processes, but we can say that we are committed to making sure that the company does this as sensitively as possible.

We also want to explore other opportunities. I am struck by the locations of some of the plants that may be affected, and I am also struck by the investment opportunities with, for example, the Siemens investment in offshore wind turbine production in Hull. There are opportunities for skilled engineering staff right across the UK and right across the region. [Interruption.] I am sorry to hear the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who knows Hull very well, talking down a major investment in skilled engineering. We remain absolutely committed to working with this company.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Employees and families across the country will be hit hard by the news that has come from BAE today. The loss of nearly 2,000 highly skilled jobs is nothing short of devastating for communities and local economies that have a proud history of defence manufacturing. Moreover, if these redundancies go ahead, there is a very real risk that these skills will be lost forever, with a knock-on impact on this country’s manufacturing capability. What support will the Government be offering to those highly skilled workers who have lost their jobs, and how will the Government support the communities affected?

A vibrant defence industry is vital for the security of this country and it brings immense economic benefits. In its statement, BAE points to uncertainty in future orders as a reason for the job cuts, and we know that the Government have pursued a stop-start approach which has not given the industry the long-term stability that it desperately needs. Will the Minister now agree that it is time for the Government to come forward with a proper defence industrial strategy to enable the sector to plan ahead? I know from my conversations with those in the industry that they are very concerned about the gaping funding holes in the MOD’s defence equipment plan. What action are the Government taking to address those and to give the industry confidence?

UK-based defence companies are also facing a great deal of uncertainty owing to the Government’s handling of Brexit. We know that the defence and aerospace industries have wide-reaching supply chains that cross many borders, so what steps are the Government taking to ensure that the sector is not disadvantaged by Brexit, and that companies do not take their manufacturing elsewhere?

Finally, the slowdown in Hawk production was also cited as a reason for cuts, but the Government could take immediate steps to counter that by bringing forward orders for nine new Hawk aircraft for the Red Arrows, thus securing their future as the face of the RAF and a global ambassador for British engineering across the world. That would provide a much needed boost to the industry. Can the Minister commit to doing that today?

This is no time for Government to stand by and do nothing. Ministers need to rise to their responsibilities and realise that proactive engagement with the industry could make a real difference to the workers concerned and to the future of our country’s defence industry.

Claire Perry: I am entirely in agreement with the hon. Lady about the need to engage closely to understand the reasons. To reassure her on a couple of points that she raised, this is not due to any stop-start change in the Government’s procurement; this is in fact due to gaps in bringing forward some of the export orders. As I mentioned, the Secretary of State has signed a statement of intent with Qatar, and indeed we are standing by to do everything possible to support further export opportunities.

The hon. Lady may not have heard, but I mentioned the talent retention system. She is absolutely right: for too long we have not thought about people and their skills and worked out whether there are other opportunities, especially in the region, to ensure that those skills are not lost. That is why we will be deploying the talent retention system that has been developed by my Department with this industry, and looking to see what more can be done.
To allay some of the hon. Lady’s questions about our commitment to shipbuilding, I can tell her that we have published the national shipbuilding strategy. I am told that the First Sea Lord will be bringing forward the refresh of the defence industry policy document very shortly.

We need to focus on the people who may be concerned about this, meet them to gain an understanding of their concerns, and see what more can be done, particularly to ensure that those vital skills are not lost to this or other sectors.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The tranche 3 variant of the Typhoon aircraft, especially when equipped with the new electronically scanned radar, will be one of the most capable and effective combat aircraft in the world. The Minister has already mentioned the letter of intent with Qatar for 24 TYPHOONS, and there are, as she has intimated, a number of other countries around the globe that are still interested in Typhoon, not least Saudi Arabia. Can she assure Members in all parts of the House that, just as the Government gave strong support to the Qatari deal, they will strain every sinew to try to support further Typhoon exports, not least in Saudi Arabia?

**Claire Perry:** I am nervously rising to answer a question from my right hon. Friend. Friend, who knows more about this than many of us will ever know. He is absolutely right: not only have we signed the statement of intent, but only last month the Secretary of State got on a plane to Saudi Arabia to press the case for using these aircraft, not just for the upfront sale but for the thousands of jobs that depend on the long-term upgrade and servicing.

All Members across the House should be supporting these export deals and the jobs that are reliant on them. It was a shame that hon. Members—[Interruption.] Well, they say, “Here we go.” Perhaps they were not listening at conference. It was a shame that the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) used her moment on the Labour party conference podium to attack the Government for strengthening co-operation and the deals that this brings with our key regional ally. Let us get behind this industry, so that we can protect and invest in this technology for the future.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This morning’s news is deeply worrying for BAE workforces across the UK, and we have only just heard that that includes 15 workers in Fife. Of course, it is not just the 2,000 BAE workers who will be affected but the small and medium-sized enterprises, the supply chains and the communities as well. The SNP offer our sympathy to all those who are affected directly and indirectly by today’s announcement.

This is the latest evidence of the Government failing to deliver on defence programmes, and this is not just about an export industry. This is about undermining skilled jobs, undermining our own defence industry and undermining the defence of the UK as a whole. What are the Government doing to investigate what has gone wrong in BAE?

Skilled workers have been mentioned a number of times. Skilled workers are exactly that—skilled. They cannot easily move from one position to another; extra training is required, so what are the Government doing to assist them? And what has been done to provide guarantees to those who are currently still employed in the sector?

Finally, can the Minister now confirm that future MOD orders will come as a steady drumbeat, and not be plagued by the dithering, delays and indecision that have contributed to today’s announcement?

**Claire Perry:** I appreciate that point, and of course the hon. Lady is right to speak for those who may be concerned about their job future, but she represents, proudly, I know, a country that has built two of the largest ships the Royal Navy has ever purchased and that has contracts to build eight Type 26 frigates and five offshore patrol vehicles—two decades’ worth of shipbuilding contracts signed by this Government. She refers to a stop-start approach. That is why the strategic defence and security review system has been brought forward. That is why we are absolutely determined to spend taxpayers’ money wisely, and supporting British industry, UK industry, is fundamental to that. I suggest that she has a look at some of those proud ships—the QE2 class—and perhaps she will come back just a little bit more cheerful.

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): As the Member of Parliament for Waraton, where final assembly of Hawk and Typhoon takes place and where 750 of the jobs that will be lost are largely located, I urge the Minister to work, as the Government did in 2011, to mitigate job losses. Then a 3,000 headline figure was mitigated to 100 compulsory losses. A similar effort must be put in this time.

Secondly, thank you for the work that the Government are doing on supporting defence exports, particularly to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with the Prime Minister’s visits to Bahrain and Saudi and the Defence Secretary’s visit to Qatar. Please will the Minister not be put off by siren voices that want us to disengage from the largest export customers for these aircraft?

**Claire Perry:** My hon. Friend makes the case very powerfully. Of course, at Waraton there are some additional benefits from the F-35 contracts being brought forward, but he is absolutely right to say that we must be really focused on these jobs and the uncertainty, but we must also be resolute in pursuing export opportunities for this fine British company.

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The Red Arrows renewal programme is well overdue and is entirely in the Government’s gift. If it was renewed, it would save jobs at Brough and the Lancashire plants. Get on with it!

**Claire Perry:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman’s pulses beat a little faster when the Red Arrows come over, as mine do when they fly over my constituency. I hear what he says and will discuss it with Ministers, but will he please work with me and others to ensure that this uncertainty is minimised for those in his constituency?

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is somewhat concerning, if not a little peculiar, that those who are standing up, notably representatives of the SNP, to condemn these job losses...
singing the praises of BAE, quite rightly, yet support a policy of being opposed to all arms sales, notably to Saudi Arabia?

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend knows that I share her position. I would make the point that these are potential job losses and that we are at the start of the process. There has to be a consultation period. A significant amount of work needs to be done with the unions, the workforce, broader industry and skilled employers right across the affected regions to ensure that we do not lose skills, that we minimise job losses, and that any job losses that do come forward are managed through voluntary redundancy.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The bottom line is that, had exports gone to plan, these sites would not be in this position. We have heard a lot from the Labour Benches, who could help in an official capacity. I suggest she does not repeat it now.

The right hon. Gentleman is brave to mention the former Prime Minister’s name. Of course we cannot lose these skills. I share her position. I would make the point that these are potential job losses and that we are at the start of the process. There has to be a consultation period. A significant amount of work needs to be done with the unions, the workforce, broader industry and skilled employers right across the affected regions to ensure that we do not lose skills, that we minimise job losses, and that any job losses that do come forward are managed through voluntary redundancy.

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focus on export opportunities and work together. Many of us represent constituencies affected by these sorts of announcements and we all fly the flag for one of the most successful companies in the world—BAE Systems. Let us get on and do it.

Ruth Smeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Our thoughts are with the workforce and their families who have received such devastating news. Let us be clear that the people who build and develop our military platforms are as vital to our national security and sovereign capability as those who operate them. We simply cannot afford to lose their skills. Will the Minister commit to developing a defence aerospace strategy, and to meeting immediately unions and employers across the sector to ensure we are not in this position again and can retain our sovereign capability?

Claire Perry: Like me, I am sure the hon. Lady is very pleased that we now have an industrial strategy that focuses on these vital sectors, putting together sector deals working with unions, employers and government. The offer has been made to all sectors to come forward with deals. As I understand it, the aerospace sector deal is well advanced.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): What actions is the Minister taking to ensure that all the young people who have started apprenticeships with BAE Systems and may be affected will be able to complete them, not only retaining the current skills we have but building the skills base for the future?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the vital role of apprentices. I think we are all proud of the fact that we now have over 3 million apprenticeship starts. Until we know—this will become clear through the consultation process—the details of any redundancies and the types of jobs that are being laid off, it is too early to comment, but she raises a very important point and I will take it under consideration.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The job cuts at Warton and Samlesbury are twice what they were in November 2015, so it is not surprising that people in Blackpool and Fylde will be concerned. The supply chain has been mentioned. What specifically will the Minister and the Department do with buyers to ensure apprenticeships in supply chains are also supported, and that the Lancashire local enterprise partnership is given the support and resources it needs to support both BAE and the supply chain?

Claire Perry: We stand ready to understand any potential impact, once the scale of any job reductions is known, and to support the Lancashire local enterprise partnership and other companies in the area to process, cope and adapt to any changes.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I have constituents who are BAE employees and, even though they are perhaps not directly affected, I know that they will be nervous. May I press the Minister on Ministry of Defence procurement processes? Specifically, will the Department look at work that is currently going out to international competition? I think that that could be avoided and that the work could be held in the UK.

Claire Perry: I refer to my earlier answer about the level of UK Government investment in Scotland, particularly in shipbuilding. We have to look at every procurement decision and understand whether it has the right capabilities for the sorts of conflicts that we ask our armed forces to undertake and what is best value for money for the taxpayer, so it will always be a mix. We should all be proud of the fact that the Government directly spend almost £4 billion a year with BAE Systems and about £18 billion a year with the British industrial sector.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister will win no friends in east Yorkshire by saying that people who might be made redundant from BAE Systems can go and get jobs in the renewables industry at Siemens. We need both sets of jobs in both industries—both, not one—to flourish in our area. I am not convinced at all that the Minister is taking our sovereign capability seriously if these jobs go. That is important to our national security, so what will she do about protecting it?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady speaks passionately on behalf of her constituents. To put this in context, we are talking about a company that employs around 36,000 people right across the UK. It has to go through—as all companies do—a process to make itself as efficient and effective as possible so that the maximum number of productive jobs can be maintained. The level of engagement of the MOD and Secretaries of State is striking—getting on planes, signing the statement of intent with Qatar, and pushing for the Saudi deal. This is what we need to do. She is right to say that we need both sorts of jobs. We need a vibrant, highly productive industrial sector that operates right across the UK, which is why she should welcome the industrial strategy and the work going on in the low-carbon economy.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I worked at the Unite trade union when this country was faced with the steel crisis. This Government had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, from a position where it would take no action to a position where it was willing to take a 25% stake in the industry. We are seeing the exact same thing again. If there was a serious industrial strategy, the Minister would take action and guarantee those jobs for the future of the industry.

Claire Perry: I lead for the Government on the steel industry. Indeed, I am working with the steel sector on its sector deal right now. The steel sector is dependent on the opportunities that come from companies such as BAE Systems being able to invest and thrive in the UK economy. The hon. Gentleman should commit to work with the steel companies’ customers, as we want to do, to ensure that they can offer the maximum market for the products of the vital and critical steel industry.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It has been a bad week for the defence industry. These job losses come on top of rumours that the Government are scrapping the Royal Navy’s amphibious ship capability, and the threat to the Royal Marines. Does the Minister agree that the Government are presiding over emerging sovereign defence capability gaps, and do something about it?
Claire Perry: I gently say that the hon. Gentleman should focus more on the facts and less on the rumours. We have committed to raising our national spending target to more than 2% of national income. We have undertaken strategic defence and security review programmes that have clearly set out a defence strategy for the future. We have invested in two decades-worth of shipbuilding contracts north of the border. I am always happy to discuss the facts. I suggest he puts down the muck sheets and focuses on the facts.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): The Minister talks about seeing things in perspective, but the perspective is this: the loss of 750 jobs in Lancashire is absolutely devastating for individuals, families, communities and the industry itself. Will she not only work hard with BAE Systems to mitigate these losses, keep them to the lowest possible number and protect as many jobs as possible, but look to protect jobs in the supply chain in constituencies such as mine in Burnley, whose very success and existence relies on BAE Systems thriving?

Claire Perry: As I said, we are keen to work closely with the company as it goes through this process. The offer is there for the hon. Lady. Lady and others who have important companies in their constituencies to work together, speaking to workers and the unions to ensure that we minimise the number of job losses and maximise skills retention both in this company and in the supply chain.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): When I worked at BAE Systems, more than 1,700 of my colleagues across the British shipbuilding industry were made redundant in 2013. At the time, that was predicated on investment to create a world-class industry, but that investment is no longer happening. We see the same across these cuts. Every time it happens, a major plank of British industrial capability is lost, whether it is the ability to build tanks or carry out the final assembly of the F-35 aircraft. We cannot compete in shipbuilding internationally or in submarine manufacturing to the same extent that we could. Will the Government commit to reviewing how they finance capital infrastructure investment in defence and ensure that we are doing this in the best possible way?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises the point—I defer to his considerable knowledge of the company—that companies need to be competitive in order to thrive and export, and we are told that that is the reason for today’s announcement. But we are spending £60 billion over the next 10 years on shipbuilding in the UK. That is one of the biggest investments in shipbuilding that I can remember. We are doing what we need to do domestically but, equally, we need to support the export opportunities for these companies right across the world.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The latest announcement of the loss of 400 jobs in Brough will be devastating to communities such as Hull and East Riding. I am sorry, but the response so far reeks of complacency. It is not good enough to say that Siemens have created jobs in Hull so that workers from Brough can find jobs elsewhere. We want more jobs, not fewer. So here is a simple question for the Minister: will she choose to save jobs by bringing forward the order for Hawks for the Red Arrows, or will she choose to see 400 jobs go?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady should be incredibly proud of the fact that one of the highest rates of job creation has been in Yorkshire and the north-east. We have committed to raising our national spending target to more than 2% of national income. We have undertaken strategic defence and security review programmes that have clearly set out a defence strategy for the future. We have invested in two decades-worth of shipbuilding contracts north of the border. I am always happy to discuss the facts. I suggest he puts down the muck sheets and focuses on the facts.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): In order to be competitive, we have to retain the skills that it looks like we are going to lose, but things are going in the wrong direction. Has the Minister seen the estimates from Unite that suggest that 25% of our defence expenditure by 2020 will be in the United States alone? Are we not missing a defence industrial strategy that will stem that, so that we are paying people for skilled jobs, not to be unemployed?

Claire Perry: I am happy to look at the sums, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that we have to ensure that we are buying the technology we need from the best places across the world when we are supporting our future defence capability. We are continuing to invest in and support this vital sector. He will be pleased to know that we are working closely with Unite and other unions where we are producing industrial strategy sector deals. The role and commitment of the workers that—particularly in the steel industry—has been vital in getting us to where we are and we cannot be underestimated. That is why the door is open for consultations and conversations with workers, the unions and colleagues from across the House.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Some 750 of these potential job losses are in Lancashire, which rightly worries many of my constituents who work there. The loss of these highly skilled and well-paid jobs will have a devastating impact on the Lancashire economy. Will the Minister tell us more about what conversations she is having with the local enterprise partnership in Lancashire: what resources and support we can have in the area, and what conversations she is having with the Department for Work and Pensions about the potential job losses and the devastating impact on my constituents?

Claire Perry: We are right at the start of the process. Indeed, the company was not supposed to make the announcement until tomorrow, as I understand it. We want to have those conversations with the LEP and other employers with the aim of minimising the number of potential job reductions made by the company and maximising the redeployment of those people who have acquired such valuable skills over their time of work.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Those of us with constituents who work in the supply chain for BAE Systems, as well as those who have constituents directly employed by the company, are disappointed to hear the Minister’s statement because she talked about managing decline. The Opposition want to see proper investment in the skills we need and in defence industrial strategy so that we do not have to buy technologies from abroad. We need the Government to bring forward orders in order to protect jobs. They can do that now. Why is the Minister not doing that?
Claire Perry: This is not about managing decline. We have a record number of people in work and have committed more than 2% of our national income to national defence. /Interruption./ And we have more than 2 million apprentices, I am told. The hon. Lady will understand that businesses and companies evolve and grow and invest in different technologies. The procurement of the F-35 fighter has brought forward jobs for BAE Systems. I appreciate her passion, but if she wants to stand on the platform of a party that wants to support exports in this vital sector, she needs to come across to the Government’s side of the House.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Minister has made a great deal of what was said at the Labour party conference, but what impact will these job losses have on making this a country that works for everyone, and how will it help my constituents to live the British dream?

Claire Perry: I commend the hon. Lady for doing her homework. As the company goes through its normal business processes, we all have to stand by ready to do whatever we can through the consultation process to ensure that the minimum number of people lose their jobs and the maximum number, with those vital skills, find other opportunities. The whole Government stand by ready to do that. Looking ahead, I call that maximising the British dream.

Point of Order

1.20 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, following the Prime Minister’s statement, the Leader of the Opposition, quite properly and rightly, sat through the entirety of the exchanges, as is the custom of the House. It did not go unnoticed, however, that the official spokesperson for the SNP, the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), left early. Given that we are about to have a couple more statements, could you rule on whether it is appropriate for official spokespeople on the Opposition Benches to stay for the entirety of the exchanges on a statement, rather than beetling out just after they have made their contribution?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The position is extremely clear—at least it has always been so—but I am happy to take this opportunity to reiterate it. If the representative of a party speaks for that party as a spokesperson, he or she remains in the Chamber for the remainder of the exchanges—no ifs, no buts. The only circumstances in which I would regard it as excusable to leave—and in those circumstances, the person would make a request—would be if they were suddenly indisposed. It is not acceptable for somebody to leave the Chamber because he or she has finished and thinks, “I have other commitments; I need to go somewhere else.”

I do not mind telling the hon. Gentleman that I was asked yesterday “would it be all right if” the Member left to attend to commitments elsewhere, and my answer was no. Let me say in terms that brook of no contradiction that I do not expect official spokespersons or their representatives to come to the Chair and seek to engage in protracted conversations or attempted negotiations on that matter. I say to the SNP Chief Whip in terms unmistakable that it is a rank discourtesy for a Front-Bench spokesperson to speak and then leave apparently on the grounds of being very busy, having many commitments, having a very full diary or having to be somewhere else. No, that is not acceptable.

As the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said very fairly, the Leader of the Opposition sat in his place throughout the exchanges, as he always does and as his predecessors have always done, and that has always been the established practice in the House. If a Member has made commitments to be elsewhere that will cause him or her to have to leave early, the answer is that those commitments should not have been made and should be cancelled. If a Member thinks that he or she would like subsequently to be somewhere else, the answer is very simple: put someone else up to speak on the statement, but do not speak and then leave. Not only is it in defiance of parliamentary convention, but it is rude to other colleagues. I should not have to make that point in respect of a party leader. It is so blindingly obvious I should have thought that everybody would have grasped it in any case.

I think that that is pretty clear and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Shipley.
Race Disparity Audit

1.24 pm

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I rise—with some trepidation, Mr Speaker—to make a statement about the race disparity audit, which the Government are publishing today through a new website, Ethnicity Facts and Figures, and a summary report, which I have ordered to be placed in the Library of the House.

The audit was announced just over a year ago by the Prime Minister as part of her commitment to tackling injustices in society. This exercise has been unprecedented in scale, scope and transparency. It covers detailed data on around 130 different topics from 12 Departments. The first product of the audit is the website, which has been created to be used by all citizens. It has been developed through extensive engagement with members of the public from across the UK, public service workers, non-governmental organisations and academics. I hope that hon. Members will agree, once they have had the chance to examine it, that the website is clear and user-friendly. Each section of the website includes simple headlines and charts, and allows users to download all the underlying data.

Although the past few decades have witnessed great leaps forward in equality and opportunity in British society, the audit shows that there is much more still to do if we are to end racial injustice. In itself, that will sound to hon. Members like an unsurprising conclusion, but the audit adds a lot more clarity and depth to that single challenge. It tells us in which public services there are the largest disparities and whether those are increasing over time or diminishing, and about the influence of poverty and gender on the wider picture. For example, black people were over three times more likely than white people to be arrested and more than six times more likely to be stopped and searched.

Three issues demonstrate the added complexity of the data. First, there are significant differences in how ethnic minorities are doing in different parts of the country. For example, while employment rates are generally higher for white people than for ethnic minorities, there is a larger gap in the north than in the south. Also, if people are expecting a report that is relentlessly negative about the situation for ethnic minorities in Britain today, I am pleased to say that it is simply not the case that ethnic minorities universally have worse outcomes. For example, people of Indian and Pakistani origin have similar levels of home ownership to white people, although that is not true of other ethnic minorities.

Secondly, on some measures there are very significant differences between ethnic minority groups. Education attainment data show that there are disparities in primary school that increase in secondary school, with Asian pupils tending to perform well and white and black pupils doing less well, particularly those eligible for free school meals. Finally, on other measures, it is white British people who experience the worst outcomes, such as in relation to self-harm and suicide in custody, or smoking among teenagers.

In terms of what happens next, the data set out on the website present a huge challenge not just to Government but to business, public services and wider society. We hope that the website will not only contribute to a better informed public debate about ethnicity in the UK, but support local managers of public services to ask how they compare to other services.

On behalf of the Government, I have committed to maintaining and extending the Ethnicity Facts and Figures website. More importantly, I commit that the Government will take action with partners to address the ethnic disparities highlighted by the audit. We have made a start through initiatives such as the action taken by the Department for Work and Pensions in 20 targeted hotspots. Measures in those areas will include mentoring schemes to help those in ethnic minorities into work and traineeships for 16 to 24-year-olds, offering English, maths and vocational training alongside work placements.

On the criminal justice system, I want to thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for his recent report. I am pleased to announce that the Ministry of Justice will be taking forward a number of the recommendations in his review. These will include developing performance indicators for prisons to assess the equality of outcomes for prisoners of all ethnicities, committing to publishing all criminal justice datasets held on ethnicity by default, and working to ensure that our prison workforce is more representative of the country as a whole. In addition, the Department for Education will carry out an external review to improve practice on exclusions. It will share best practice nationwide and focus on the experiences of the groups that are disproportionately likely to be excluded. The House can expect further announcements on future Government work to follow in the coming months.

The approach that the Government are taking is “explain or change”. When significant disparities between ethnic groups cannot be explained by wider factors, we will commit ourselves to working with partners to change them.

The race disparity audit provides an unprecedented degree of transparency in reflecting the way in which ethnicity affects the experiences of citizens. It is a resource that will tell us how well we are doing as a society in ensuring that all can thrive and prosper, and I commend it to the House.

1.30 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank the First Secretary of State for early sight of his statement.

There is value in putting all the data together in one portal, but what matters most is what the Government are going to do about the problems that have been identified. For some years, the Women’s Budget Group and the Runnymede Trust have been looking at some of the burning issues, including the impact of austerity on black and minority ethnic women in the United Kingdom.

The real uncomfortable truth is that the Prime Minister cannot pretend she did not know that there were in-built structural injustices before 2010, because she wrote to the then Prime Minister about “real risks” that “women, ethnic minorities, disabled people and older people will be disproportionately hit by cuts”.

Our Prime Minister, knowing full well the damage that would be caused by Conservative cuts, has done nothing but exacerbate the problems. Far from tackling burning injustices, she has added fuel to the fire. We need solutions and a sustained effort to tackle those burning injustices, because talking shops just will not cut it.
Mentoring schemes are good, but they are not nearly ambitious enough. The closure of Sure Start centres has contributed to the poor start of many young children, and the closure of Connexions, which was a valuable tool for young people, was also a mistake.

The Prime Minister has said that if these disparities cannot be explained they must be changed, so let me ask the Minister some questions. Will he explain or change the Government’s policy of rolling out universal credit, which has caused some people to lose their homes and has caused vulnerable people to plummet into debt? Will he explain or change their policy on the public sector workers’ pay cap, which has disproportionately affected women and people from diverse communities? Will he explain or change their policies on personal independence payments, which have resulted in the statement by a United Nations panel that the UK has failed to uphold disabled people’s rights? [Interruption.] Conservative Members may not like to hear this, but it is important if we are to tackle the burning injustices that exist in our country.

Will the Minister explain or change the Government’s policies on tuition fees, which have crippled the life chances of young people? Will he explain or change the delay in the increase in the minimum wage, which the Government have renamed the living wage? Will he explain or change the Health and Social Care Act 2012, the house-building programme, the Access to Work policy, or the Trade Union Act 2016? There are so many policies that the Government need to explain or change.

We cannot ignore the fact that the actions of this Government have contributed to the burning injustices in our country. They have failed to understand the value of equality impact assessments, which the last Prime Minister described as “red tape”. Britain is at its best when everyone has the opportunity to succeed—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) says, “What are you going to do about it?” Let me tell him. Labour issued a manifesto to tackle problems of discrimination. Its policy proposals included the introduction of equal pay requirements for large employers; the launching of an inquiry into name-based discrimination; the implementation of the Parker review recommendations; the enhancement of the powers and functions of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which has been subject to Government cuts; and the boosting of income through the introduction of a real living wage—to name just a few.

There are other possible solutions to the problem, some of which must come from the Minister’s own side. The Government should reintroduce race equality audits and impact assessments, independently assess the Treasury, introduce “blind” sentencing in the criminal justice system, and implement their responsibilities under the public sector equality duties.

What we need is a Government who are not afraid to act on uncomfortable truths, and Labour is that Government in waiting. History has shown that positive change only happens under a Labour Government, and we are ready once again to deliver a fair and more equal society for the many and not the few.

Damian Green: I am puzzled by the disparity between the Labour party’s response to the audit and that of the stakeholders who actually work in the sector. I came to the House today from a roundtable at No. 10 that was chaired by the Prime Minister and attended by about 12 of the principal non-governmental organisations that have worked for many years to improve the lives of ethnic minority people in this country. They are universally positive about this, unlike the Labour party—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) says that was not what they told her, but I have quotations from them here. Simon Woolley of Operation Black Vote has said:

“The findings from the Race Disparity Audit present us with a real opportunity to make transformative change in tackling persistent race inequality”—[HON. MEMBERS: “What are the Government going to do?”]

He actually went on to say:

“Yes, some findings make uncomfortable reading, but unless these things are laid bare we can’t begin to resolve them.”

After 13 years of a Labour Government trying to hide the facts, we now have a Government who are ready to expose them and to do something about them.

Jeremy Crook of the Black Training and Enterprise Group—apparently it has also been ignored by the Labour party—says:

“The data can support local communities to have conversations with local public bodies about ensuring that no ethnic group gets left behind in education or health or any other area of public life.”

The people who actually know what they are talking about welcome the audit, and welcome what the Government are doing. The people who do not are members of the Labour party who live in their own world.

The hon. Member for Brent Central appeared to take the general view that in all areas problems for people from ethnic minorities were getting worse. I appreciate that the website has been live for only about an hour, so she will not yet have had time to investigate all 130 datasets, but when she does, she will find a point that is much more nuanced than those that she has made. There are some problems, and some things are getting worse, but some things are getting better. The difference between the general employment rate and the rate among all ethnic minorities decreased from 5 to 10 percentage points between 2004 and 2016. Since 2004, employment rates have increased among all ethnic groups. The inactivity rate among Pakistani and Bangladeshi people, who have often had the worst unemployment rates, has fallen by 10%—[Interruption.]

I would hope that Labour Members, rather than laughing from the Front Bench, might welcome the fact that some of our most disadvantaged communities are doing better than they ever have before in this country. The Labour party seems to think that that is something to laugh about.

The hon. Lady referred to universities and tuition fees. I remind her that more disadvantaged people are applying for university places and going to university than ever before, and more people from black and minority ethnic communities are applying than ever before. Labour Members have a view of the world in which people are permanent victims, but that is not what this audit shows. Their lack of transparency, and their lack of ability to welcome a step by the Government that is welcomed by all experts in the field, reflects very badly on their party.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and the Prime Minister for her commitment to tackling the injustice
that is race discrimination. When will the Government bring forward plans across Government to ensure that it is clear what every single Department is doing to tackle these inequities, and particularly to separate economic disadvantage from race discrimination, because at the moment the figures blur together?

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, because we of course need to determine the real causes of disadvantage, as I have said. Sometimes they are based on ethnicity, and sometimes on other factors. That is precisely why, in addition to the individual measures that I have announced today for three Government Departments, other Departments will be making policy proposals in the months and years ahead to address the various disadvantages, and they can now, for the first time, be based on publicly available facts and figures. That is the great advantage of the step forward that we have taken today, because we now have transparency. We will have much better evidence to ensure that the policies we bring forward to tackle disadvantage will be effective.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I thank the First Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. None of this comes as a surprise to any of us. A lot of work has been done over the years, including by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). Although we would welcome any new, user-friendly website, it really should not have been the centrepiece of today’s statement. I very much hope that the Government will really should not have been the centrepiece of today’s statement. I very much hope that the Government will be able to take effective and robust action. Given that Departments are carrying out their own pilots in the reviews, it is important that we have a holistic, multifaceted and co-ordinated response. Therefore, when will the Government come to the Chamber with a statement setting out how Departments will go forward with a joint solution for this problem?

Damian Green: That question is slightly similar to the previous one I answered from my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). When the hon. Gentleman reads the audit, he will find that, rather than having a one-size-fits-all solution, it is precisely the value of the data we now have that will enable us to take specific action in a number of different areas.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): When?

Damian Green: I have announced some of the action today. I am sorry that the shadow Foreign Secretary was not listening to the statement I made all of five minutes ago, when I announced three separate pieces of action. There will be action from other Government Departments as we develop the policy response to the evidence.

Let me make one final point to the Scottish National party’s spokesman. I would encourage him to encourage his colleagues in the Scottish Government to take part in this process, because so far we have found it quite difficult to get the equivalent information for some areas in Scotland that are completely devolved. Facts and figures on reserved matters in Scotland, where they are available to the UK Government, are included in the audit, but at the moment there are no devolved facts and figures, and I genuinely think that it would help people in Scotland if those could be added to the audit figures.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The review by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) did not actually include much hard evidence of discrimination. For example, despite setting out with the assumption that black people are more likely to be found guilty by juries, it concluded:

“Juries are a success story of our justice system. Rigorous analysis shows that, on average, juries—including all-white juries—do not deliver different results for BAME and White defendants.”

Will the Minister therefore ensure that success stories are also highlighted, that any actions taken are based on evidence, and evidence alone, and that we do not have solutions looking for problems?

Damian Green: I am delighted to have the opportunity to agree entirely with my hon. Friend—that might be regarded as a rare treat. He is exactly right; the report by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) was very fair in pointing out the great successes in the criminal justice system as well as the problems, some of the answers to which I have announced today, and my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor will follow up on those. Across the board in this area there are indeed some successes, as I set out in response to the Opposition spokesperson. In some areas there are clearly endemic problems that have been going on for a long time, and action needs to be taken by society across the board—by central and local government, by businesses and by arm’s length bodies. We are not desperately searching for problems for our solutions. We will bring forward solutions only for those problems that we know exist.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the First Secretary of State for the information that he has given the House today about the audit, but it does not answer the probing questions that the data throw up. Why are ethnic minorities still disadvantaged in access to public services, what are the Government going to do about it now that the audit has revealed the extent of the problem, and why have they left out religious discrimination, such as that against Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sikhs and others?

Damian Green: The answer to the hon. Gentleman’s last question is that it is a matter of what we record in our official information. When he looks at the audit, he will see that all the data sets contain a different level of detail. The question of religious discrimination simply cannot be included in an audit of this type, because we have never collected that kind of information. For example, we do not necessarily ask someone what their religion is when they go to the jobcentre, and I suspect that many people would find being asked for too much information intrusive, so we have to work with the material we have. With regard to disadvantage, he will have heard me announce the three Departments’ policy responses today—there are others that I have not announced, from the Home Office and others. He can rest assured that where the audit identifies problems, central and local government will respond to them across the board.
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Government on undertaking this broad-ranging audit, which is long overdue. We know what the problem is, and we know what needs to be done to address it. However, given the huge scope of the audit, will the First Secretary of State inform the House what is proposed to ensure that there is consistency and a high level of monitoring across the huge breadth of areas covered?

Damian Green: That is a very good point. There are clearly different problems in different areas, which is precisely why, in addition to individual actions by Departments, there is an inter-ministerial group, which will allow every Department to find out what the others are doing and ensure that it is responding as it should to the individual problems assessed in their area. Of course, the audit is not a one-off event, because the figures will be added to continually so that new policy responses can be made to new problems as they emerge. It will be a living document.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Let us give credit where it is due, because this data set is important. I welcome the Government’s commitment to the transparency that will help to shine a light on the structural racism that still exists in UK society. May I offer the First Secretary of State some advice based on painful experience? The Conservative side of the coalition Government spent five years insisting that we try to get employers to do gender pay gap reporting on a voluntary basis, until my Lib Dem colleagues and I finally won the battle for mandatory reporting in March 2015. We must not now waste five years in the same way, so will he now commit to introducing mandatory race pay gap reporting?

Damian Green: As the hon. Lady will know from her time in government—it was a pleasure to serve with her—we are unlikely at this stage to leap to such long-term commitments on the basis of information that we have only just gathered. However, she makes a fair point. The underlying point is that this is an issue not only for central Government, but for the private sector. I know that many private sector organisations, some of which were represented at the roundtable event held at Downing Street this morning, are anxious to follow up a lot of the work on trying to reduce the gender pay gap and to address pay gaps among people from different ethnic backgrounds as well.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I applaud the Government’s efforts, because this is the first such audit to be carried out. As chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on Pakistan and on communities engagement, I have consistently raised with the previous and current Prime Ministers the matter of the British Pakistani community falling behind on educational attainment, employment and wages. What is the Government’s strategy be to address that? Will there be effective community engagement so that the answers come from the bottom up?

Damian Green: Absolutely. My hon. Friend has a long and honourable record of campaigning in this area. The employment response from the Department for Work and Pensions will be targeted at specific areas, and 20 hotspots where the most difference can be made will be identified. I obviously cannot commit today to saying what those 20 will be, but I would be surprised if the impact was not deliberately designed to help the areas in which those communities tend to live, where the unemployment rate is not as good as it is on average.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): I am slightly confused, so will the Government confirm something for me? Lots of information has been provided, but some of the data collated were already in place and the Government have not specifically told us what they are going to do about that data. A couple of problems have been identified, but talking about mentoring schemes is not the sole answer to those problems.

Damian Green: We have identified 130 different data sets, and coming up with 130 different policy responses in one statement might be a bit much. More seriously, much of the information is new—20 of the data sets are completely new—and it seems sensible to consider the evidence, work out what the best policy response is and then do the policy, not the other way around, which is how the Labour party seems to want to do things.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What a load of sententious, vacuous guff. Honestly, the Secretary of State should be ashamed. Has he just taken over the department for circumlocution and the office of how not to do anything while pretending to do something? The honest truth is that unless serious analytical work is done to check whether the statistics are a matter of correlation or causation, there is no value to this work whatsoever. Mrs Thatcher fell at the same time as Marathons were changed to Snickers, but I am not aware that there was any causal relationship between the two.

Damian Green: Behind the hon. Gentleman’s characteristic bombast is a serious point. He says that correlation is not the same as causation, so would he like to have a word with his Front-Bench team, who are demanding that all the policy responses should come now before we have done the analysis that he sensibly asks for? We are doing things the sensible way. Not only do his Front-Bench team have no polices, they appear to want policies before they have looked at the evidence. That would be the worst way to go about things. I appreciate that, in all sincerity, he believes that his Front-Bench team are as bad as I believe they are.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is in a very excitable condition. I gently point out to the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) that she would wish to be viewed across the country and around the globe as an aspiring stateswoman, and I think her demeanour ought to reflect her ambition.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am sorry that the shadow Front-Bench team find this issue so amusing. As someone who grew up in a deprived working class area—more girls in my school went to prison than to university—I take this issue very seriously. While I welcome the audit, the fact that it focuses on race, not the common issues that all communities face of broken families, poverty and getting into work, means that it
misses some things. I point the Secretary of State in the direction of “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, which has been produced by Conservative Members, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and addresses some of those issues in more detail.

Damian Green: I know the valuable document to which my hon. Friend refers. I recommend that she read the audit carefully, because she will find that it reveals the huge differences between areas that look similar demographically or in their ethnic makeup. Anyone who reads the findings carefully and sensibly will realise that some policy prescriptions may not be based on ethnicity and may need to be based on the other factors she mentioned. The sensible way for any Government to proceed—certainly the way that this Government will proceed—will be to look at the evidence and then devise the policy.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What other reports on race have been incorporated into the race audit data? Why have Sikhs, who are recognised as a separate ethnic group in legislation, been excluded from the audit? Will he put that right by ensuring that Sikhs are not further discriminated against and that the 2021 census will include a Sikh ethnic tick box?

Damian Green: I can only reply to the hon. Lady. With what I said to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). Religion is not routinely collected in many of the 130 data sets, so it would be impossible to include. It is not a question of excluding any particular group. Many of the data sets have existed for decades, and we as a society have to decide over time how much personal information we want to collect and publish on every individual in this country. It is sometimes helpful to collect such information, because it helps public policy making, but people sometimes regard it as intrusive. Our view on that may change over time, and we can always have discussions in this House about what level of personal information we want to give to Governments and then have Governments publish, so that might be a way to aid public policy making, and I am happy to discuss that with her.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Having attended a failing school in your constituency, Mr Speaker—albeit before your time—and then having spent five years in a formerly failing school in west London, I have a real passion for what can be achieved through education if we have these race disparity audits. Indeed, that is exactly what happened to transform a west London school’s five A to C GCSE grade rate from 9% to 60%. In addition to sharing my distaste for the appalling behaviour of the Opposition, I ask Ministers to take the data and learn about the best practice in institutions so that it can be rolled out and applied nationally.

Damian Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising an important point. Action that is taken at a local level—perhaps in an individual school—can be transformative for the lives of thousands of people. The audit will enable us to identify the areas with problems in a more fine-grain way than ever before, so that we can deal with those problems, whether they relate to education, employment and training or policing, in the areas where that action can have most effect. That will be how we can make the most beneficial difference to most people’s lives.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the First Secretary of State for his statement. For some considerable time, black and white British boys in receipt of free school meals have had some of the lowest levels of educational achievement across the United Kingdom, and that is also the case in Northern Ireland. I welcome this initiative, but the data will be of value only if the analysis is mainstreamed into policy making in Departments. What do the Government intend to do to ensure that that happens?

Damian Green: Much good work has been done in Northern Ireland in that field, and we will continue to spread best practice and learn from where we have had successes. Making that part of mainstream policy making is one of way of doing that. The hon. Lady mentioned educational attainment, and it will be interesting to see the evidence from free schools in the years ahead. I suspect that they will be shown to do particularly well by pupils with various forms of disadvantage, but we will develop the evidence over time and we will base our policy on evidence—[Interruption.] I can tell from the noise level that the Labour party has already come to a view about free schools without any evidence. That is typical of why their policy making is always so bad—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Calm. My advice in particular is tendered for the benefit of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant: I am very quiet.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman witters from a sedentary position that he is very quiet. I think the answer to that is that it is all relative.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): May I remind the First Secretary of State that it was the previous Labour Government who led an inquiry into the Stephen Lawrence murder and, following that, introduced the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Equalities Act 2010, which require monitoring, and that this Government have neglected much of that? I welcome this audit, but ask the Minister please, for the love of God, to focus on the structural inequalities—that is, child poverty, which will hit 4 million by 2020, and the cuts to further education and to education maintenance allowances. Those interventions and cuts to those provisions are making it worse for ethnic minorities and white working-class communities. If the Government are serious, we need to stop just doing research and evidence gathering. That is important, but it is not good enough if it is not followed by action.

Damian Green: The hon. Lady is right that one should get the evidence and then take action. I discover from those on her Front Bench that they prefer to take action blind without looking at the evidence first. One fact that we can jointly celebrate is that among the places where educational attainment has gone up significantly for all groups is her area. That shows that there can be improvements in areas that people once wrote off, which should never happen in any part of this country. I can tell the hon. Lady that this Government will not allow that to happen.
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): This morning the Communities and Local Government Secretary highlighted that some Pakistani and Bangladeshi women do not have English. May I suggest that one reason for that is that the Government have cut English for speakers of other languages funding by 60%? Will the Minister commit to change that and reverse the cuts so that everybody can reach their potential?

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government was quite right to point out that one of the biggest things holding people back is their not being allowed to speak the language of the country. That is why we spent £100 million last year on teaching English to ensure that more people than ever before can have access to it and play a full role in mainstream society.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): In light of the audit today, will the Government commit to implementing their statutory equality impact assessment on some of their policies and, more specifically, on some social security policies, such as universal credit and the personal independence payment?

Damian Green: I am happy to assure the hon. Lady that every policy has the equality impact assessment applied to it.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The First Secretary will recognise that disparity effectively begins at birth, and one thing we do know is that in Greater Manchester, for example, four in 10 children are not ready for school when they go there. In a town such as Rochdale, that rises to a considerably higher figure among the Pakistani, Kashmiri and Bangladeshi communities and in the poor white community. Will the report make any real financial difference to investment in that early years education?

Damian Green: I have not had a chance to welcome the hon. Gentleman back to the House; the last time I met him he was a police and crime commissioner, and PCCs have a key role to play in making this audit practical. I suggest he looks at it, because one fascinating thing I found when I looked at the audit before it was publicly available is the precise level of analysis that can be done of individual communities. He will be able to see that certain similar communities require different solutions. Different problems are at different levels in neighbouring towns that otherwise look very similar. I have looked at a lot of the towns in the north-west in and around Manchester and I can only suggest that he has a look at the evidence. He will find that there will be different policy prescriptions for what would otherwise be similar towns.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome the focus in the audit on educational attainment and many Members have already spoken about the subject. That shows how stubbornly the gap persists between pupil premium children and others. If the Government are serious about addressing this burning injustice, should they not allocate the money to schools to tackle the problem rather than forcing them to make damaging cuts, which the poorest families are least able to mitigate?

Damian Green: I say to the hon. Lady that the schools budget is of course protected and, secondly, that the simple prescription that more money means better public policy was exploded many years ago. She can see that through the different performances of schools in different areas and the differences between individual schools. There is certainly a problem in raising educational attainment and that is why I am very proud that over the past seven years we have had 1.8 million more children attending good or excellent schools than we had in 2010.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Like others, I welcome this audit, but I am not sure that we needed an audit to tell us of the deep rooted injustices and discriminations in many of our institutions. I have a specific question about charges brought under joint enterprise. Is the Minister aware of research from Manchester Metropolitan University that found huge disparities in the number of people in prison under joint enterprise and how those prosecutions are brought?

More than three quarters of those in prison for joint enterprise found that gang narrative and neighbourhood narrative were used in their prosecution if they were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, compared with less than 40% for those from white backgrounds. I had a recent case in Moss Side that found exactly that: the young black men who were facing these charges found that they relied heavily on a neighbourhood narrative about Moss Side. It is no wonder that people from places such as Moss Side feel that the criminal justice system works against them, not for them. What will the Minister do about it?

Damian Green: I was not aware of that report, but it is clearly centrally important to the sort of evidence that the audit will produce. The hon. Lady will be able to see from the audit at a local level whether the criminal justice system is working in a discriminatory way. I will speak to the Lord Chancellor and the Prisons Minister about the specific points that she raises.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let me turn to the issue of evidence collection as regards schools. Following the Macpherson report, there was a requirement that all schools had to report racially motivated incidents in school to their local authority. In 2010, that requirement was dropped, so there is now no information coming from academies or free schools, no local statistics and no national statistics on racist incidents in schools. Today, the Institute for Public Policy Research has shown that the figures on exclusions probably under-represent the true position—the figure could be five times as high—mainly because academies are dressing up exclusions under other names. Is it not time that people from places such as Moss Side feel that the criminal justice system works against them, not for them. What will the Minister do about it?

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman has great expertise in the area of local Government and I am happy to tell him that one policy change that has already come about as a result of the audit is an external review of exclusions to deal with precisely the sort of issue that he has just raised.
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Last year, at Cabinet Office questions on 2 November the then Cabinet Office Minister, Ben Gummer, told me that in preparing this audit the Government would apply the 2011 census classifications, which, for example, enable us to identify Gypsies and Travellers in the statistics. I note from the report that it is not yet the case that all Departments are adopting the 2011 census classifications. Will the First Secretary tell us today whether the intention is to require Departments as well as other Government agencies and bodies to apply those definitions?

Damian Green: We are certainly working towards that. Some of the problem is that the information in the audit is not all collected by central Government. The audit contains quite a lot of information concerning Travellers, and some of the educational attainment information revealed for Traveller children, in particular, is especially worrying. I take the hon. Lady’s point and we are seeking, as I have said in answer to other questions, to be as transparent as possible with the information we can collect. We will continue to move down that road.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There is quite a lot of evidence in the audit that Gypsies and Travellers are one of the most discriminated against disadvantaged groups. I sat through and took part in last night’s debate, during which a succession of the First Secretary’s colleagues simply wanted to talk about planning enforcement matters. If he actually wants this audit to have an effect, perhaps he could start by explaining things to his colleagues and changing their attitudes to some of these issues.

Damian Green: I am not sure there was a question in that, but I take what the hon. Gentleman said in the spirit in which I know he meant it. His remarks will have been heard.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Will the First Secretary address in a bit more detail the serious issue, highlighted by the audit, of educational underachievement among white working-class children? In particular, will he address the fact that only 32% of white children on free school meals reach their expected level of attainment at key stage 2 and that white working-class children from poorer backgrounds are the least likely to go to university? Are we not dealing with a cycle of deprivation that spans the generations? The challenge is not, as he said it is, to “explain or change”—it is to explain and change. May I put it to him that tackling deprivation to university than ever before, but there is always more to be done in this area. This audit gives us some of the tools to enable us to do it in a more precise way. That will be the long-term benefit of this audit.

2.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Bombardier, updating the House on the trade dispute brought by Boeing against that company. The case has serious implications for the workers at Bombardier Aerostructures & Engineering Services—Short Brothers—in Belfast, where the wings for the C Series aircraft are manufactured.

Following a complaint by Boeing, the US Department of Commerce has made two provisional determinations in the case, calculating duties of 220% in relation to alleged subsidies for Bombardier and of nearly 80% in relation to alleged mis-selling by Bombardier into the US market. These initial determinations are bitterly disappointing, but they are only the first step in the process: a final ruling in the investigation is due in February and would be subject to further appeal, were this to be upheld. This Government have been working tirelessly to bring the case to a satisfactory resolution and we will continue to do so.

In filing the petition, Boeing asserted three claims: first, that without Canadian and UK Government subsidies Bombardier would have been unable to develop the C Series; secondly, that Bombardier is selling at or below production cost its C Series aircraft in the US; and thirdly, as a result, that this is causing the threat of imminent material injury to the US domestic aerospace industry. This action followed Bombardier securing an order from Delta Airlines for 75 aircraft.

The Boeing petition makes allegations about funding support from the Canadian federal Government and the Government of the Province of Quebec for the C Series. It also alleges that the UK’s provision of £113 million of repayable launch investment funding, committed to Bombardier Short Brothers in 2009 to support the development of the composite wings, contravened trade rules. We strongly and robustly refute that allegation.

I want to make the Government’s position very clear: we consider this action by Boeing to be totally unjustified and unwarranted and incompatible with the conduct we would expect of a company with a long-term business relationship with the United Kingdom. Boeing does not manufacture a competing aircraft, so although Boeing claims harm in respect of the US aircraft order, it actually has no product in the 100 to 125-seat sector. Furthermore, this system of launch investment for the development of new aircraft reflects that of all major commercial aircraft programmes in their early years, including the Boeing 787. We refute entirely any suggestion that our support contravenes international rules.

The Shorts factory in Belfast employs more than 4,200 excellent skilled workers, with almost a quarter of those working on the C Series. It also supports a supply chain of hundreds of companies and many more jobs across the UK, as well as supporting nearly 23,000 workers in the United States of America, where 53% of the content of the C Series is produced by US-based companies. We will continue to work tirelessly to safeguard jobs, innovation and livelihoods in Northern Ireland.

From the outset, as is obvious, this has been a dispute that joins Canada and the UK, and we have been assiduous in working closely with the Government of
Canada in our response. The Prime Minister has discussed the case with Prime Minister Trudeau, and I have been in regular contact with Canadian Foreign Minister, Chrystia Freeland, to co-ordinate our response and actions. We have had intensive engagement from across government at the highest levels. The Prime Minister has discussed the matter twice with President Trump, stressing the crucial importance of Bombardier’s operations in Belfast and asking the US Government to do all they can to encourage Boeing to drop its complaint. My Cabinet colleagues, including the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Trade Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary, and I have reinforced our serious concerns with, among others, the US Secretary of Commerce, the US Secretary of State, the US Treasury Secretary, the US Trade Representative and other members of the Administration, as well as, on this side of the Atlantic, the EU Trade Commissioner. My colleague the Minister for Energy and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), has met with Boeing’s president and chief executive to make absolutely clear the impact of these actions on the future relationship with the United Kingdom.

I am grateful for the consistent and indefatigable efforts of the constituency Member, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and indeed the whole community in Northern Ireland who are united in opposition to this action. We will continue vigorously and robustly to defend UK interests in support of Bombardier, its workforce in Belfast and those in its UK supply chain. We will continue to work jointly and collectively with the Canadian Government. We will work closely with Bombardier, its workforce and its trade unions, and we will do everything we can to bring about a credible, early resolution of this totally unjustified case. As I said, the initial determinations are the first step in the process, but we completely understand the worry and uncertainty facing the workforce, which means that the earlier this issue can be resolved, the better. To that end, I expect to have further discussions with Boeing, Bombardier, the Canadian Government and the US Government in the days ahead. The House should be aware that neither this Government nor our counterpart in Canada will rest until this groundless action is ended. I commend this statement to the House.

2.17 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Following a complaint by Boeing, on 26 September the US Department of Commerce ruled that Bombardier had benefited from state subsidies and imposed a 219% tariff, and on 6 October it found engagement in below-cost selling and imposed an additional tariff of 80%. This decision has catastrophic ramifications for Bombardier, the 4,000 staff it employs directly in Northern Ireland and the 20,000 staff employed throughout the UK in supply chains. Not only does this jeopardise the livelihoods of thousands, but the Northern Irish economy also faces a serious threat, as Bombardier represents 8% of Northern Ireland’s GDP and about 40% of manufacturing output, so the danger to jobs, the future of Bombardier and the Northern Irish economy because of these decisions in the US is very real.

Sadly, also very real has been the apparent inaction of the Government thus far. The Opposition have repeatedly sought information from them, but we have so far been disappointed by the response—so today I will try again. First, what was the specific content of, and what commitments were made during, the Prime Minister’s and other Cabinet members’ conversations with the US Administration and indeed Boeing?

Secondly, have the Government had any discussions at all with the European Commission, specifically with the Directorates-General for Trade and for Competition, about the support that it might be able to provide? Thirdly, does the Secretary of State have any plans to target all relevant US legislators to lobby the US Administration, including the Senate Committee on Finance, the House Ways and Means Committee, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and those with constituency interests in Bombardier and its wider supply chain?

Given the devastating impact on the Northern Irish economy and on the already fragile Northern Irish peace settlement, what attempts has the Secretary of State made to urge the Irish Government to apply greater political pressure on the Irish caucus on the Hill to highlight the fact that this is not simply a US-Canada dispute, as the Secretary of State for International Trade has sadly already suggested? Fourthly, what attempts have the Government made thus far to provide evidence to the US independent Trade Commission that Boeing did not compete for the Delta contract and does not manufacture a comparable model to the C Series that would have matched the contract specification?

Finally, does the Secretary of State accept that this whole affair demonstrates the very real security risk of military reliance on one foreign supplier? Ministry of Defence contracts with Boeing total £4.5 billion, but is it correct, as reports suggest, that the Defence Secretary is reluctant to use that leverage because of our dependency on the company? Worse still, the Northern Ireland Secretary and the International Trade Secretary have been somewhat quiet on the issue. Are they afraid of being exposed in Northern Ireland for their failure to protect jobs, or are they so keen to score a sweetheart trade deal with the US that they simply want to wash their hands of this matter? Clearly, politics is being put ahead of the welfare of workers in Northern Ireland. I eagerly await the Secretary of State’s response to my questions, but I fear that Bombardier and everyone who depends on the firm are considered by this Conservative Government to be a fair price to pay for a post-Brexit trade deal with President Trump.

Greg Clark: I am disappointed with the hon. Lady’s response. If anyone is putting politics ahead of the welfare of workers, the evidence was there. She asked some reasonable questions, which have reasonable answers. I said in my statement that the European Commission had been engaged. Commissioner Malmström has been consulted, as have other member states across the European Union. As for the Irish Government, Simon Coveney, the Irish Foreign Minister, has been engaged as well. On the issue of submitting evidence to the Trade Commission in the United States, that has indeed been provided, and, in response to the initial determination, further information will be provided to make it clear that there are no grounds for demonstrating detriment to Boeing, as this aircraft does not compete with Boeing. That has been addressed in clear terms.
Engagement across Government, the Province of Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland has been consistent and unrelenting right from the beginning. I will not detail all the meetings that have been held and the calls that have been made, but they will continue—no stone will be left unturned. We have had 24 calls or meetings with the US Administration, 12 with Boeing executives, and 20 with the Government of Canada. Every day during this process, we have been engaged in getting rid of this unjustified complaint. I would welcome the support of the whole House in this endeavour. I wish to put on record my gratitude to the trade unions, which have played a very constructive role. When it comes to making the case for this action being totally unjustified, I would like to think that this House is completely united not only in looking to the importance of the Bombardier presence in Belfast, but in underlining our total determination to throw out and see dismissed this unjustified action.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that successive UK Governments have always been rigorous in compliance with their international legal obligations on state aid, and that, therefore, these punitive tariffs that are proposed are both irrational and unjustified and should be removed?

Greg Clark: I agree with my right hon. Friend. As she will remember, we do have a very rigorous system for scrutinising state aid, which is why we are totally confident that the system of launch aid that we have applied is compliant with all the international rules. The allegation does not have merit, and I expect to see it thrown out.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement.

The Scottish National party regrets the preliminary ruling by the US Department of Commerce that could put these highly skilled jobs at risk in Northern Ireland, and we sincerely hope that the UK Government are doing all that they possibly can to engage with Bombardier and the trade unions to ensure that the future of all employees is as secure as possible.

These rulings clearly show that no one will be spared Trump’s protectionist agenda of “America first”, with jobs in the UK and Canada—some of the US’s closest allies—being put at risk as a result of the punitive tariffs being imposed on Bombardier.

I am afraid that the Tory Government have been cosying up to Trump with the false illusion—or delusion—that this will help them sign a trade deal with the US after Brexit, without realising that Trump’s Administration will not give in to any demands that may give a competitive edge to the UK over the US.

 Leaving the EU means that we will lose leverage in trade negotiations as we will no longer be part of the world’s largest single market of some 500 million people, and we will lose the expertise that the EU has built up over the past 40 years negotiating on our behalf.

Does the Secretary of State not agree that the best way to promote trade and to create jobs across the UK is by maintaining our membership of the single market and the customs union?

Greg Clark: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman supports our opposition to the proposed sanctions. If he has studied the form in these matters, he will know that the initial determination was not entirely unexpected by any of the parties, which was attested to by the Government of Canada. We have an outstanding case that there is no detriment to Bombardier, which we expect to prove along with the fact that the launch aid has been compliant. On our relationship with the European Union, he will observe that this dispute has taken place while we are a member of that Union. That justifies our commitment not just with the European Union but globally to seek a rigorous system of free trade in which there is a fair assessment of complaints rather than these punitive and unjustified tariffs.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and congratulate him on the work that he is carrying out in this matter. It is of course extremely important to Northern Ireland that we get this right and protect the jobs and the industry in the Province. May I also ask him if he will—I am sure that he will—seek to strike a balance here? Boeing is a very important customer to many companies in this country, including some in my own constituency, which is very heavily dependent on aerospace.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which is why many of us in this House are so bitterly disappointed with the actions of Boeing. The company has been the beneficiary of important defence contracts. As many Members know, it is opening an important factory in Sheffield—its first in Europe. A long-term industrial relationship with this country, which it clearly seeks, entails obligations. Those obligations are to treat reasonably and fairly those important parts of our economy that are being attacked without justification.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): In thanking the Secretary of State for his statement, may I just reflect on the fact that this Northern Ireland trade dispute is unprecedented in terms of the political engagement it has had from our Government? As the representative for east Belfast, I greatly appreciate not only the work thus far but the presence today of the Northern Ireland Secretary; the Business Secretary; the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington); the defence procurement Minister; the Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry); and, indeed, the Foreign Secretary, whose presence shows just how much support there is politically for us in Northern Ireland, and I greatly appreciate it.

I was, however, bitterly disappointed by the comments last week by the Commerce Secretary, Wilbur Ross. His comments were not only belligerent, but showed—while the process continues—the political support at this early stage for Boeing in its dispute. There is deep concern about the political overtures tied up with this ongoing issue. May I ask the Secretary of State, having engaged thus far, and seeing that what happened was the inevitable outcome of that engagement, how long it will be until we can assuage the concerns of those in Belfast and Canada that there are meaningful and genuine consequences in store should there not be an adequate and suitable resolution to this case?
Greg Clark: I repeat my thanks and admiration for the work of the hon. Gentleman, who is standing up for his constituents with vigour and strength. I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute, too, to the leader of the DUP, and indeed to community leaders across Northern Ireland, for the united response that they have made. We are disappointed not only with the response, in terms of the proposed tariffs, but with some of the words that have been used around this. It seems to me that the case is overwhelming: we can demonstrate that any aid that has been given is not only completely in line with international norms, but consistent with the type of assistance that Boeing has had over time. We expect to be able to demonstrate that in a convincing way.

It also seems to me impossible to establish detriment to Boeing, given that it does not have a competitor aircraft. The process of the hearings is that, following the initial determination, there is a further call for evidence, and the evidence that we, completely hand in hand with the Canadians, will present will demonstrate that. We look to the US to make sure that this is a rigorous process and is not politically influenced.

We have been very clear. The Defence Secretary, on a visit to Northern Ireland, was very clear, as I have been, that this is not the behaviour we expect from a trusted partner, and could have implications for the future relationship between Boeing and the United Kingdom.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I had the great pleasure of going to the wings factory in Belfast, and I pay handsome tribute not just to the 4,000 workers there but to Bombardier in general and to the C series—it is a beautiful and exceptionally fine aeroplane, and we wish it great success. I also thank the Secretary of State and all his colleagues in the Government for the fine work they are doing, but does he share my concern that this decision, which we all hope will be overturned, marks a shift towards a more protectionist policy by the United States Government? Does he agree that does not bode well, especially as we leave the EU, if we do not get a proper deal with the European Union?

Greg Clark: In my view, it underlines the importance of securing free trade not just with the European Union but around the world. The essence of a free trade agreement is that we have proper protections and dispute resolution mechanisms on which we can rely, so this issue underlines the importance of continuing free trade. As I say, it is not unusual in the aerospace sector for complaints to be made in one forum or another. I think all parties were expecting the initial determination to be as it was, and said as much. In terms of our work—we will not give up on this—we will fight to secure the legitimate future of this very important part of our aerospace sector, and we will do whatever it takes to do that.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I join other hon. Members in saying that I hope this dispute is resolved as quickly as possible in the interests of everybody in Northern Ireland who works for Bombardier or in the supply chain. May I just pick up on a couple of points the Secretary of State made in his statement? First, he said that the Prime Minister had discussed the matter twice with President Trump to ask the US Government to do all they could to encourage Boeing to drop its complaint. While we welcome those sentiments, is the dispute not, in the end, with the US Government rather than Boeing, because it is up to the US Government, not Boeing, to impose sanctions? I hope the Prime Minister is also making that clear, and I just wanted some clarification on that point.

Secondly, the Secretary of State said he had "travelled to Chicago to meet Boeing's president and chief executive to make absolutely clear the impact" on our future relationship with the company. Can he say a little more about what he has said to Boeing about that future relationship, which I am sure Boeing values, with our Government?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for the questions from the Chairman of the Select Committee. In terms of the process, only Boeing can withdraw the complaint. There is an administrative requirement on the part of the Department of Commerce to determine, initially, a complaint, hence the desire—and I think it is highly desirable—that Boeing withdraw this complaint. If it will not—and, so far, it has not—it must be determined in a completely fair and objective way. If it is, it will have no merit, and will be thrown out. Both are therefore important, but it would be in the interests of everyone in the workforce and in the country that the complaint be withdrawn so that this uncertainty can be taken away.

In terms of the points that I put to Dennis Muilenburg, who is the chief executive of Boeing, we were very clear that Boeing has a reputation in this country that was beginning to grow in a positive way through the investment in Sheffield and elsewhere, and to jeopardise that reputation and relationship by doing something that is completely unjustified is something that I do not regard as in the strategic interests of Boeing, and I said that very explicitly in terms.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement and for his balanced comments this afternoon. Our airports and our aerospace sector really matter to many communities represented across this House in terms of local jobs and prosperity, and particularly to Southampton in my constituency, which is No. 1 in Europe and No. 2 in the world. What estimates has my right hon. Friend made of the potential for growth in this sector, despite this mighty challenges?

Greg Clark: I am glad my hon. Friend asked that question, because, as the whole House knows, the aerospace sector in this country is one of our proudest success stories. It is growing. It is a huge source of exports—over 90% of the product of our aerospace sector is exported. Productivity growth, which is much debated in the House at the moment, is six times the rate in the economy as a whole. A quarter of a million very highly paid jobs are in aerospace, and we are absolutely determined—those colleagues who are familiar with our industrial strategy will see this in advanced manufacturing and in aerospace in particular—to build on those strengths and advance them. That is why the Boeing investment in Sheffield was welcomed, but to see that relationship jeopardised by this complaint is a huge setback and a bitter disappointment.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s condemnation. What has happened is condemned not just in Northern Ireland,
but across these islands, including by the Irish Government, as the Secretary of State said. I hope Bombardier will accept my invitation, as Chair of the International Trade Committee, to help combat this. However, on the wider issue—the World Trade Organisation aspects—is it not concerning that disputes outside the EU, which might be a WTO issue, and where the efficient European Court of Justice will not, and cannot be, used in a post-Brexit situation, the UK may see itself picked off by friend and foe all the more frequently in the future? Surely it has to be a concern to the Secretary of State that interactions with more states will be at WTO level by definition if the UK has changed status.

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful for the support of the hon. Gentleman. The more we can be absolutely clear that the whole United Kingdom, all parties and both sides of the House share this view that the complaint should be withdrawn and the dispute settled, the better, and that has been emphatically the case here. Again, I make the point that it is clearly in all our interests to have free trade. In a sector where 90% of products are exported, that is obviously the case. But that trade needs to happen in a way that gives us confidence that disputes, which will happen from time to time, are resolved in a fair and objective way. We play by the rules—we always will—and all we want is a system that respects that. We are confident that we will gain from that scrutiny.

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): Will the Government consider stepping in to support the workers in Northern Ireland who are affected by Boeing’s decision in the same way as they stepped in to support the workers during the Tata Steel dispute?

**Greg Clark:** We will of course always be behind the workers in every part of the country, but my determination is not only to save those jobs in Northern Ireland but to see the number of jobs increase and the company prosper and grow. As has been said, the C Series is gaining orders—it is an aircraft that fills an important position in the market. I would like to see the Belfast success story continue to grow in the years ahead.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This situation is a tragedy for Northern Ireland and for Bombardier, and particularly for Northern Ireland industry, which, as I know from when I visited last week, is clearly reeling from the impact of Brexit and the concerns about our leaving the customs union. I welcome the steps the Government are taking, but I wish to press the Secretary of State on the punitive tariffs. What does he think such tariffs imply for the prospects of a beneficial future UK-US trade deal? It is true that this is all happening while we are in the EU, but does he think we will be more or less vulnerable to this sort of bullying in future if we are in or out of the EU?

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman describes this as a tragedy. I am absolutely determined that these jobs will be saved, and I never give up. I am determined that this will not be a tragedy; indeed, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), I am determined that Bombardier will go from strength to strength. On future free trade agreements, I repeat my earlier point: we want free trade agreements that provide for a rigorous dispute resolution mechanism on which we can rely. That is something we would hope to negotiate with the US. The credibility and rigour of that process is essential to our agreeing it.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Many of my constituents, like those of the Secretary of State, work in Gatwick, and I am sure they would send their solidarity to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for the work he is doing to support workers in his constituency. The Secretary of State mentioned that aerospace industry turnover has grown to £30 billion; with respect to Boeing’s position, can more be done to use financial leverage for the future?

**Greg Clark:** The aerospace sector is a good example of how taking a strategic approach, bringing together the industry firms with universities and research establishments, makes it attractive for small firms in the supply chain to establish themselves. That has been the basis of the aerospace sector’s success, and it is the approach we take in the industrial strategy. As the Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) said in response to the urgent question earlier, an aerospace sector deal will build on that existing reputation and further advance the industry’s prospects.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): Bombardier is a UK success story; I congratulate the workforce and management in Belfast. I agree with the Secretary of State that the relationship with Boeing is important, not only from a commercial point of view but from a military view. Does he agree that if Boeing does not relent on this issue, it will put at risk its plans for both technology enhancements and commercial opportunities in the UK?

**Greg Clark:** Yes.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): As I understand it, the Secretary of State has said that the preferred solution would be a negotiated settlement with Boeing—an all-out war between the UK and Boeing is clearly in no one’s interest. He rightly referred to the development of Boeing’s first manufacturing output facility in Europe—it is in my constituency and work has started on it—but Boeing has been an essential and original player in the development of advanced manufacturing facilities in Sheffield and Rotherham for the past 10 years. It is crucial that we do everything we can to defend and protect the jobs at Bombardier, while doing nothing to compromise the possibility of further development and jobs from Boeing in Sheffield.

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I know from having attended the meetings in Sheffield just how important and welcome that investment has been. Nevertheless, we need to be absolutely clear that although advanced manufacturing institutions such as those in and around Sheffield are being established, we expect, just as the Canadian Government do, that if companies participate in institutions that promote the UK aerospace sector, they must not at the same time recklessly damage another important part of that sector.

**Lady Hermon** (North Down) (Ind): I am enormously grateful to the Secretary of State for his valiant efforts to save the Bombardier jobs in Northern Ireland. In his statement, he emphasised the fact that the British
Government are working jointly and collectively with the Canadian Government; nevertheless, I am really curious—as are, I am sure, people in Bombardier and in Northern Ireland—to know how effective he reckons the diplomatic efforts between the British and American Governments have been. This is our closest ally: how effective have the diplomatic efforts been?

Greg Clark: As I say, we are making a joint effort. It is important that we co-ordinate completely our approach with the Canadian Government, and we have done that. The intensity of our engagement and the actions that we have taken have been completely agreed with the Canadian Government. They obviously have an important relationship with the US, as we do, and we want to make use of that to communicate, as we have done, the importance of Bombardier in Belfast and the importance of applying fairness in this situation, and we will continue to do that. As I have said—my Canadian counterparts are on record as saying exactly the same—this is the first, initial determination. There is some way to go and we, and I personally, will not relent until these jobs are saved and Bombardier can continue its progress in Belfast.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues for all the work they are doing on this issue, and I pay tribute to the workforce, the trade unions and the management of Bombardier in Belfast for the way they have approached this crisis. Does he agree that, not only today but going forward, everybody in this House should be united behind the workforce and the management? They should not seek to use this issue to score petty political points or as a battering ram against the Government. Our focus should be on the workers: that is what they want to see forward, everybody in this House should be united in this crisis. Does he agree that, not only today but going forward, everyone in this House should be united in standing up for the Bombardier workforce.

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman speaks eloquently and strongly, and I think that is the mood of the House. Whatever the resolution, which we are determined will secure and sustain Bombardier’s future, the workforce is currently going through a torrid time, with people wondering about their livelihoods. That is why the earlier this situation can be brought to a conclusion by Boeing withdrawing its action, the better. It is important that we in this country show complete solidarity. Our debates about Brexit and the American Administration can continue, but every single Member of this House should recognise that this is an unjustified complaint against an important part of the economy. We should be united in standing up for the Bombardier workforce.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I express my sympathy with Members from Northern Ireland, who have spoken eloquently on the issues that face them directly and the workforce that they are trying to protect. The Secretary of State in his statement said that, earlier in the year, the Minister for Energy and Industry, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) met Boeing about the future relationship with the company. The Secretary of State will be well aware that there are huge and strategic contracts for P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, based at Lossiemouth, which will be important for the UK’s future strategic position and its position in NATO. What specific discussions has the Department had with Boeing about other contracts? How do we square the circle when it comes to what is happening with Bombardier in Northern Ireland and other Boeing contracts that we might have to rely on in future?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman allows me to re-emphasise the conversation that I had with Boeing, which is that if there is to be a continuing relationship, we need the confidence that Boeing will deal fairly with the United Kingdom. If this is to be a strategic partnership, it needs to be a partnership, and partners do not take the kind of action against important United Kingdom interests that Boeing is seeking to take.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that many workers at Bombardier and in the supply chain across County Antrim, and indeed all of Northern Ireland, will find it despicable that some people would come here—indeed, outside this Chamber—and use the peace process, the spectre of the border and the plight of workers as a critique of how the Government are dealing with this issue? We must stand together, united in our approach to this. Will he also give the House the assurance that when it comes to crunch time—and crunch time is coming—the British Government will not be found wanting in how they defend British workers in Northern Ireland?

Greg Clark: I can give that complete assurance to the hon. Gentleman. I think this does unite everyone in the House and across all parts of Northern Ireland, and across the island of Ireland. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has again been assiduous in ensuring that no stone is unturned in making the case, as have the leader of the hon. Gentleman’s party and others in Northern Ireland.

A point on which I did not answer the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon)—I apologise—was about our contacts with other people in the US system: congressmen, senators and governors. That has been carried out, again in complete co-ordination with the Canadian Government, and it has been significantly helped by the cordial relations that exist between the United States and many people in Ireland.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): These events put me in mind of those in the 1970s, when the American aerospace industry ran an aggressive campaign against sales of Concorde, spiking any sales of that plane at the time. Does the Secretary of State agree that the motivation for Boeing is not about a trade dispute, but about wiping out a competitor? This situation on its own would be serious enough as it is, but does he also agree that, taken with the statement earlier about the problems at BAE Systems, this is a defining moment for the British aerospace sector as a whole and that we need strong Government support across the sector?

Greg Clark: I think these are separate issues. This is a trade dispute—an unjustified complaint that Boeing has brought against Bombardier. It is important that it should be thrown out and the case dismissed. As for the motivation for it, that is for Boeing to describe. It has alleged that this is unfair competition. All I would observe is that it is difficult to point to competition when the product does not compete with an existing Boeing product, so Boeing’s longer-term motivations will need to be justified to the International Trade Commission.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and commend my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for his hard work and his endeavours on behalf of the workers. I have a Bombardier factory in my constituency, as well as a number of companies that feed into the supply chain. It is clear not only that those at Bombardier will be affected, but that those in the supply chain will be as well. At the same time, Bombardier’s aerospace business was worth $2.4 billion in the US last year—800 companies and, as the Minister said himself, 23,000 workers. Is it not the case that Boeing needs to be careful about the hand that feeds it?

Greg Clark: I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman has to say, and he is right to point out that, as well as the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who has worked so indefatigably on this, constituency representatives across Northern Ireland—indeed, across the whole of the United Kingdom—are also affected. I agree with his injunction that we should continue to pursue this to a satisfactory resolution. He has my commitment that we will do that.

Perhaps I can end by reiterating a tribute to the workforce, not just at Bombardier but in the supply chain, who have continued to work completely uninterrupted at the high level and on a calibre of product for which they have an international renown. We want that international renown extended and able to prosper in the future, and I am absolutely determined that we will do that.

Legalisation of Cannabis (Medicinal Purposes)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.54 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to allow the production, supply, possession and use of cannabis and cannabis resin for medicinal purposes; and for connected purposes.

This is the Elizabeth Brice Bill. Elizabeth Brice was a remarkable lady who campaigned for many years in this House to re-legalise medicinal cannabis. She was a brilliant person. She was a television producer. Among her many achievements, she translated the Noddy books into Latin. She came here because, as a highly intelligent woman, she was struck down at the age of 26 with multiple sclerosis, which virtually destroyed her life and affected her young family. After 10 years of using medicinal drugs, she found one that gave her peace and relief from her spasms. She came to this House and had a cup of cannabis tea on the Terrace.

Our law states that Elizabeth Brice could have been sent to prison for five years for doing that. There was a court case in which an elderly man in a wheelchair moved a jury to tears with his account of his use of medicinal cannabis. The jury said, “We don’t want to find this man guilty; we disagree with this law.” They asked the judge whether they could change it and find the man not guilty, but the judge said, “No. You don’t make the law, I as a judge don’t make the law; only Parliament can change this.” So the ball is very much in our court today.

Who supports the Bill? The Multiple Sclerosis Society has given me a statement saying that it wants to see this Bill passed. It says:

“We believe the law on cannabis should be changed (like it’s changing in Ireland, Canada and Germany), so that someone with MS can access cannabis for medicinal use”.

I would also have had the support of Queen Victoria, although I had difficulty contacting her, as she used the substance every month of her life.

Cannabis was used as a medicine in this country until 1973. There is a host of people who are now Elizabeth Brices outside. One of them wrote me a very moving letter in which he said that two people in his family are using medicinal cannabis. A medical professional reported to the police that those people were using medicinal cannabis, albeit in a way that was not harming anyone—it was a completely victimless crime; they were growing it themselves. That man writes that he could easily get a criminal record and his family would be in all kinds of trouble as a result.

Are we really saying that this is a sensible law? The tide of world opinion is moving in the direction of legalising cannabis. Some 29 states in America—the majority—have already legalised medical cannabis without any problems arising. There are six or seven states in Europe where it is possible to use cannabis medicinally. We have forgotten that this is the oldest medicine in the world. It has been used for at least 5,000 years—archaeological evidence supports that—and we know that if there were problems with it, they would have been discovered years ago.
As with all drugs, people will object that there are malign side effects, but as someone who has been campaigning in this House against drug misuse for many years, I can say that the ones that we have trouble with now, such as valproate, are the opioid drugs and neuroleptic drugs used in residential homes for the elderly. There is massive misuse of these drugs, which have very serious side effects. Cannabis involves side effects, but no problems have arisen in all the states and countries that have taken this on.

If we legalise drugs, we reduce side effects by taking the market out of the hands of the criminals and the scammers, and putting those drugs in a legal market that can be run by doctors using medical priorities. These are the lessons from all the states in America that have taken this step.

A policewoman suffering from multiple sclerosis came to me because she found herself needing to get her cannabis from the criminals she once arrested. That is the situation that people are in now. I am touched that people have made the journey here today to ask this Parliament to decide not on the basis of prejudice, but on the basis of science.

It is time for us to lead public opinion rather than following it. It would be an act of compassion and courage for us to pass this Bill and make the very minor change it proposes: moving cannabis from schedule 1 to schedule 2. At the moment, the law says that cannabis has no beneficial effects, but we all know that it does, but if there are problems with it, the former chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has said that we would need to prevent 5,000 people from taking cannabis to stop one possible case of psychosis. I do not know whether anybody will be opposing this Bill today—no one has suggested to me that they will do so—but I would like to deal with that question. Yes, with any drug there are risks, and I certainly would not want to see anyone using cannabis mixed with that deadly, addictive drug, tobacco.

Today people are using the drug outside on the green as a food, a drink, a tincture and an ointment, as well as vaping it. I believe that the public and the police—two police and crime commissioners have written to me in support of the Bill—know that the law is unenforceable. It is time for us to take our courage in our hands and say, “Let us take this step.” Doing so would be a step on the road to intelligent campaigning. We place too much reliance on the prejudices and screeching of the press; it is time for us to take the lead. Doing so would be an act of kindness and compassion that would bring genuine relief to people who are suffering from serious ailments.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Ordered.

That Paul Flynn, Frank Field, Caroline Lucas, Mary Glindon, Jeff Smith, Kelvin Hopkins, Crispin Blunt, Michael Fabricant, Martyn Day, Ronnie Cowan, Layla Moran and Mr Alistair Carmichael present the Bill.

Paul Flynn accordingly presented the Bill.

**Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 108).**
Mr Carmichael: Indeed, but the hon. Gentleman will be perfectly well aware that the House has for many years used a formula under which the Government would have been entitled at best to a balanced Committee, while in all other respects the majority would have been with the Opposition parties.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Stitched up.

Mr Carmichael: Indeed—stitched up, as the hon. Gentleman says.

The Government did that on 12 September on the basis that the confidence and supply agreement that they had struck with the Democratic Unionist party gave them a working majority in the House. Unfortunately, that working majority was not in evidence when it came to the Opposition day debates the next day.

It is worth noting in passing that the Opposition day debates on 13 September were the first to be held since Parliament reassembled after the general election—some 27 sitting days, to be exact. In 2015 the same gap was 13 sitting days, in 2010 it was 16 and in 2005 it was 12. We would have to go back to the early days of the Labour Government in 1997 to find a comparable figure, although I suggest that it is worth considering the nature and volume of legislation that was dealt with in the early days of that Parliament compared with what we have had since 8 June.

Our system relies on a delicate combination of checks and balances. The best Governments—and if ever there was a time in our country’s history when we needed the best possible Government, this is surely it—are those that are tested by Parliament, by the Opposition parties and by their own Back Benchers. Time and again, our system fails when the Government and the Opposition agree and arguments remain untested. How different might the debates on the case for going to war in Iraq in 2002 and 2003 have been if the then Opposition had been prepared to take a more questioning approach to Tony Blair’s case? I am sad to say that this Government, however, do not welcome scrutiny by Parliament, but rather seek to avoid it.

The issues before the House on 13 September were questions of substantial significance. If they are issues on which the Government do not command a majority in this House, then the Government should not get their way. The Prime Minister went to the country in June seeking a larger majority than the one she had, but the people of Britain denied her such a majority. However difficult that may make life for her and her colleagues, the verdict of the people on 8 June ought to be respected in this House. It is the job of all of us in this House to ensure that it is, and Opposition day debates are one important way in which that should be done. Occasionally, it is possible for the Government and the Opposition to agree on a motion and for it to be passed without a Division. Until now, there have been very few examples of a motion being disputed in debate, but still passing without a Division.

Very rarely, the Government of the day are defeated in a Division. In my time in the House, that was most memorably accomplished in 2009, when the rights of Gurkha soldiers who had served the Crown to settle in the UK was at issue. Matters came to a head on 29 April 2009, when on a motion from the Conservative party in opposition the then Labour Government
were defeated. It is worth going back and reading the *Hansard* of that debate. It is apparent, even just reading the words on paper, that that debate meant something. That debate was more than just a debate; it was a vehicle for righting a wrong and a vehicle for change.

We have all heard it said over the years that Parliament has increasingly been marginalised by the Executive. A series of large majorities given to the Conservative and Labour parties has undoubtedly contributed to that process, but this Parliament should be different. Not because you or I say it should be different, Mr Speaker, but because the people of the United Kingdom at the ballot box on 8 June said that it should be different.

In one sense, the Government have done us a favour by bringing this issue to a head, because it forces us as a House to decide what our role in the future of this country is going to be. Is it to be an active participant, with a strong voice and a decisive say, or is it to be a supine bystander as the Government continue to do as they wish, regardless of their lack of a mandate and, as is increasingly obvious, their lack of authority.

I have been a member of many debating societies over the years. They have all been fine organisations that provided entertainment and mental stimulation in equal measure. I mean them therefore no disrespect when I say that I stood for Parliament believing I was doing something more significant than signing up for a debating society. The difference is that in Parliament—in this House—we can actually effect change. Whether we choose to do so is in our own hands.

3.16 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am grateful to you for calling me early in the debate, Mr Speaker. I will reciprocate what the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said about me—I have been friendly with him, except perhaps in a political sense—but I think he rather overstates his case. Let me run through his argument. First, he describes a particular decision about two particular Opposition day debates, and suggests that that will be the Government’s practice going forward. The only evidence that he presents is a single tweet by a single political journalist, quoting unnamed sources about the Government’s behaviour going forward. It seems to me that the practice has been—it certainly was when I was Government Chief Whip—to consider what we do about Opposition day motions on a case-by-case basis.

Mr Carmichael: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There have been only those two debates so far. It was for that reason that, at business questions on 14 September, I gave the Leader of the House the opportunity to refute what was in the *Huffington Post* article. Had she chosen to do so, we would not be here today.

Mr Harper: First, I do not think it is reasonable to expect my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to comment on every single press comment about the House and dignify them all with a response. To come back to the point I was making when I took the intervention, the Government cannot be expected to have a blanket policy for what they do about Opposition days. We look at the motion on the Order Paper.

I have got into trouble in the past. When I responded at the Dispatch Box to Opposition day debates, I was often criticised because I used to do that dreadful thing of actually looking at the words on the Order Paper that the House was being asked to agree or not. I would be told that they did not really matter—what mattered was the debate we were having, and the general principle, and that we did not worry about the words. Well actually, the words are important and the right stance for the Government, each time there is an Opposition day motion—indeed any motion—before the House is to look at the words on the Order Paper and then make a judgment about whether they wish to support or oppose them. I will come to the specific motions that were being considered in a moment.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): May I take it from what the right hon. Gentleman has said that from now on, when a DUP Member makes a comment in an Opposition day debate—as they did in our first Opposition day debate in this Parliament—that they are not minded to support the Government at the end of the day in a vote, the Government will not be persuaded by the DUP, will not be dictated to by the DUP, but will actually call a vote? Is that what the right hon. Gentleman is saying?

Mr Harper: No, it is not what I am saying. I am saying what I said in my own words. Let me go to the decision that I think the Government took on the motions; then the Leader of the House may comment in due course.

What the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, in his pitch to Mr Speaker yesterday and in his debate today, was that in both debates the Government argued against the motions that were on the Order Paper. Before today’s debate I carefully read the debates to see whether that was right: I do not think it was. In the NHS debate, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health did not argue against the motion on the Order Paper. What he actually said was that it was bogus, because it did not address some of the fundamental issues. *[Interruption.]* This is exactly as I said, Mr Speaker. As soon as attention is drawn to the motions on the Order Paper, which the House was being asked to agree, people do not like it. That is the fundamental point here, and one I am sure my right hon. Friend considered before he made a decision about the way that Government Members should vote.

Mr Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): One of the most precious things in this House is a party deciding when it will or when it will not vote. That is up to a party, or indeed up to a Government. This is the first time I can remember an Opposition complaining that they are not being defeated by the Government.

Mr Harper: It is interesting, because when I read the debate it was of course the Opposition spokesman, the shadow Secretary of State for Health, who asked the Government not to divide the House on the NHS
motion. The Government then proceeded not to divide the House on the motion, and now all we get is a load of complaints—which seems to me remarkably strange.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend draw any comfort, as I did, from the fact that the party once of Campbell-Bannerman, Gladstone and Lloyd George has now decided to predicate the national debate on information that it ascribes to something called the Huffington Post?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which requires no elaboration from me.

A couple of things struck me about the motion on the Order Paper about the NHS. First, it made very selective use of statistics. For example, it talked about the number of nurses and midwives joining the Nursing and Midwifery Council register, which is an important figure, but of course not directly applicable to the number of nurses working in the NHS, which the Secretary of State correctly pointed out had increased by 12,000. So it would not be right to oppose a motion that had some factually correct statistics in it, but they were not relevant to the argument about the number of nurses and midwives actually working in the NHS.

The final part of the motion talked about ending the public sector pay cap of 1%, and of course my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who excellently wound up that debate, made the point that for the forthcoming financial year, the Government would allow the pay review bodies more flexibility anyway, so it seemed rather pointless to be engaging in that debate.

I have no complaint about the Labour party, but this is what parties do in opposition. It put in the words at the end that suggested that NHS workers should be given a fair pay rise, which I think would probably command support across the House, including from myself and my hon. Friends. The debate, of course, is about what constitutes a fair pay rise—what is affordable. But to think we were going to fall into the trap of voting against a motion that would just then enable lots of Labour MPs to put out leaflets saying that we were against a pay rise! They are playing a political game. We know what the game is. I am going to be very fair: it is what we would do if we were in their position. It is not our job, though, to fall into their trap and make their lives easier. Our job is to get on with governing and making the right decisions, which is exactly what we did.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am a new MP and I am still getting to know my way around, but I did not expect my new role to be reduced to being a member of a talking shop. Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that not allowing a vote on the Opposition debate reflects a deep disregard for parliamentary democracy?

Mr Harper: I would have more sympathy with the hon. Lady if she had actually bothered to turn up to listen to the debate in the first place, which, according to her own colleague, she did not—[Interruption.] Well, according to Hansard, the Liberal Democrat health spokesman, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), said on the record that he was the only Liberal Democrat present and that he felt he had to intervene. If that is inaccurate, perhaps the right hon. Gentleman should correct the parliamentary record. It is not my job to be responsible for the accuracy of the parliamentary record of the right hon. Gentleman. I note he is probably the only Liberal Democrat MP not here today.

Wera Hobhouse: I was in the debate; please check the record. I was there and I was very disappointed that we could not vote.

Mr Harper: I do not dispute the hon. Lady’s thing. All I can say is that I was quoting from Hansard, when the Liberal Democrat health spokesman said:

“I feel that as the sole Liberal Democrat present it is my duty to intervene.”—[Official Report, 13 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 862.] If that is inaccurate, that is a matter for the right hon. Gentleman and he should correct the record. That is not my responsibility.

On the motion on the national health service on the Order Paper, my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary laid out the facts about the importance of a strong economy in paying for the health service. He laid out a lot of important facts about our record on the health service, but actually he was not arguing that we should vote against the motion at all. He frequently said it was a bogus motion and that he did not want to engage with it, so I do not think that that can be said.

Mr Bone: I really have heard enough from the former Chief Whip. Parliament voted, Parliament made a decision. He cannot get away from that. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that if Parliament decides on something the Government should listen?

Mr Harper: Yes I do. I read the motion very carefully. It said that the Government should abandon the 1% pay cap; and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, in her response to the debate, made it clear that the pay review bodies for the next financial year would have more flexibility—so, in effect, she confirmed that part of it.

The second part of the motion referred to NHS staff getting a fair pay rise. We all agree that NHS workers—indeed, public sector workers generally—should get a fair pay rise. The point of political debate is to ask what “fair” means. We have to balance affordability for the economy, what public sector workers need to get paid for recruitment, retention and morale purposes, and what those in the private sector, who pay taxes to pay for our public services, are being paid. If we read the motion, I think we find it was completely consistent with the Government’s policy, which I suspect is exactly why the Secretary of State for Health did not feel it was sensible to urge Conservative colleagues to vote against it.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful indeed to the right hon. Gentleman for taking a second intervention. He obviously was unable to hear my first intervention, so may I just repeat my question? If the 10 DUP MPs indicate during an Opposition day debate that they are not going to support the Government, will the Government vote on the motion?
Mr Harper: The answer to that is that I have no idea. I am a former Government Chief Whip, not the current one.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There’s a reason for that. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Harper: I am grateful for my colleagues’ support. I suspect the Government will make their decisions on Opposition day motions on a case-by-case basis, when they have looked at the words on the Order Paper.

The second very important motion on the Order Paper that day was about the higher education regulations relating to tuition fees. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education set out the case powerfully on the basis of the proposition before the House on the need for tuition fees. She contrasted it with the position in Scotland, which does not have tuition fees. In Scotland, fewer children go to university, fewer poor children go to university and universities are not properly funded—not a position I want to see in England. She laid that out clearly.

It was also the case that the regulations were laid before the House on 15 December 2016 and came into force on 20 February this year, so voting against them would have had no effect whatever. There was an argument at the front of the debate when the shadow Secretary of State for Education tried to pretend that it was somehow the Government’s fault that the measures had not been debated. She said that the Opposition had prayed against them but had not had time for a debate. Well, I looked at the record, and there were three Opposition days between the regulations being laid and coming into force on 20 February. Those days were Wednesday 11 January, Tuesday 17 January and Wednesday 25 January. On any of those occasions, the Opposition could have used their time to debate the regulations. If the House had voted against them on any of those occasions, they would not have come into force. The fact that the Opposition chose not to do so is their responsibility, not the Government’s.

Chris Bryant: As Government Ministers constantly reiterated, the whole point of secondary legislation was that if the Leader of the Opposition called for a debate not in Opposition time, the Government would provide that if the Leader of the Opposition called for a debate. She said that the Opposition had prayed against them but had not had time for a debate. Well, I looked at the record, and there were three Opposition days between the regulations being laid and coming into force on 20 February. Those days were Wednesday 11 January, Tuesday 17 January and Wednesday 25 January. On any of those occasions, the Opposition could have used their time to debate the regulations. If the House had voted against them on any of those occasions, they would not have come into force. The fact that the Opposition chose not to do so is their responsibility, not the Government’s.

Mr Harper: That is not reasonable. The hon. Gentleman knows, as came out in the debate, that a date had been decided to debate those regulations, but then the general election intervened.

Hon. Members: We didn’t call it!

Mr Speaker: Order. Large numbers of hon. Members are proclaiming from a sedentary position the self-evident truth that it was not their decision to call the election—a perfectly valid piece of information, but entirely useless for the purposes of this debate. The important point is that Members must be able to hear each other speak in it.

Mr Harper: Of course, it was technically the decision of this House to have the early election. The Prime Minister brought the motion before the House but—thanks to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which I had a little hand in—it was, of course, the decision of the House to have the election.

My point stands. There were three opportunities when the House could have voted down the regulations. The Opposition had the time and chose not to debate them. The point is that the regulations had already come into force when the House was faced with the debate on 13 September, so voting against them would have had no practical effect. It would have been a completely pointless exercise to have a vote that would have had no effect. It is not, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, the House being a talking shop. Procedures about when we have to vote on secondary legislation are set out in the statutory instruments legislation and the parent Acts; those time limits had expired. That is the Opposition’s fault because they had three opportunities in January when they could have used their time to debate the matter, but they chose not to do so.

Mr Carmichael: If, as the right hon. Gentleman suggests, a vote is a nonsense, surely that is an argument for going ahead with it, not for avoiding it.

Mr Harper: No, no. I do not follow that at all. The point is that the vote would have had no practical effect because the regulations had already come into force and the time limit for revoking them had passed. That was the Opposition’s responsibility, not the Government’s.

Chris Bryant: No!

Mr Harper: It is an arguable point. I have made my argument and the hon. Gentleman has made his, as he will no doubt do again later.

There were two good reasons why the Government chose, looking at the words on the Order Paper on 13 September, not to divide the House. I do not think that sets a precedent for the future. The Government will make those decisions when they look at future Opposition day motions. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is making a mountain out of a molehill. I suggest that the House waits to see what happens on future Opposition days before it gets itself so worked up. We have had a good gambol around the subject but I do not really think that the right hon. Gentleman has made his case to the satisfaction of Members more generally.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has concluded his speech, for which we are grateful. I call Valerie Vaz.

3.34 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I start by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate, following the application from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) yesterday.

While the motion reads, “That this House has considered the Government’s policy in relation to the proceedings of this House”, I would prefer to deal with two aspects of it separately: the constitutional convention that decisions of Parliament are enacted by the Government and the scheduling of Opposition days throughout the year as set out in Standing Orders. Speaking in support of the motion, I will start with the allocation of Opposition days.
The Government have often to be brought to the House for bypassing and— I hope I do not put this too strongly— appearing to have contempt for the House. The two-year Session of Parliament was announced by press release on 17 June 2017. The right hon. Lady could have announced it during business questions on 22 June, her first outing as Leader of the House, but she did not. A Session usually starts in November and runs until the following October. On average, there used to be four Sessions in a Parliament, but that was before the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011; there is now an assumption of five Sessions. Each Session carries an allocation of Opposition days, as set out on page 334 of “Erskine May”.

Valerie Vaz: I am sorry but I thought we were in politics. We are politicians, so that is what we would expect to do in here. In any event, it does not really matter; I will come on to whether a motion is binding. It is something we need to check. If the hon. Gentleman, who is very assiduous, checks “Erskine May”, he will see that on page 334 it says:

“Standing Order No 14 provides that on 20 days in each session proceedings on business chosen by the opposition parties shall have precedence over government business.”

These books on the Table are not window dressing: “Erskine May”, Standing Orders—they are there because they are the rules and privileges of the House, as interpreted by the very honourable Clerks. As you know, Mr Speaker, there have been numerous requests for the full allocation of Opposition days—you have heard me ask the Leader of the House for the dates at business questions—but they have not been forthcoming.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I would be most grateful if the hon. Lady could advise the House where in “Erskine May” it says that Government Members have to vote in a Division.

Valerie Vaz: They are the rules and privileges of the House. I will find the reference. The intervention was clearly done to disrupt the debate. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to stop, and if you will allow me the time, Mr Speaker, I will look it up, or, alternatively, we can eat into the time of Back Benchers. He can decide. I am happy to look through it.

Chris Bryant: Is not the much bigger point that if Members decide to let the vote go through, they are effectively assenting to the motion?

Valerie Vaz: That point, which I am coming to, needs to be clarified, and it is the Government’s job to do such a thing. Mr Speaker, you have heard me ask for clarification several times, and we have had numerous discussions through the usual channels, but we have had absolutely nothing. It is said that Parliament is treated this way. I did not think that, in the first week back after the conference recess, I would be standing here arguing for the same thing I did before the recess.

We play a vital role in our democracy. The use of the term “Her Majesty’s Opposition” was first coined in 1826 by John Cam Hobhouse and was given statutory recognition in 1937. The official Opposition is defined as “the largest minority party which is prepared, in the event of the resignation of the Government, to assume office”.

That is an important constitutional role, and we should not be prevented from doing our job. We would like to fulfil that role but that is the effect of not giving us dates for our debates. The Government want to stifle debate and so deny all the Opposition parties a chance to challenge them and put forward their policies.

Secondly, having been given that Opposition day on 13 September, the shadow Secretaries of State for Health and for Education moved and spoke eloquently to their motions, and we then witnessed the bizarre spectacle of the Government making no comment whatsoever. They had tabled no amendment to the motion. There was no voting for and no voting against, so Parliament was left in limbo. What was the status of the motion? It was a proper, substantive motion, defined as a self-contained proposal submitted for the approval of the House and drafted in such a way as to be capable of expressing a decision of the House—and it did, in this case to NHS workers and students about to start university.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady is right to make the point that the Chamber is not just a hothouse of debate. It is about what people want to listen to, to find out what is important. There are parents in the country who are quite keen to hear the views of all the political parties about how to address the very sad problem of baby deaths. Is she embarrassed and ashamed that she and her colleagues are detaining the House by having a debate about debates, and not about the issues?

Valerie Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but he is wrong. My family has suffered a baby loss. This is a very important date, because it is the anniversary of the death of my brother’s baby, my brother being my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). I know how important the issue is, but this is not a debate about a debate. People throughout the country want to know what is going on and what we do in Parliament. They want to know that their Parliament is supreme. They want to know that we are debating and discussing.

The position that was outlined in the motions appeared in the manifesto of the Democratic Unionist party, and its members owe their electorate an explanation of why they did not vote in support. Because the DUP has a confidence and supply agreement with the Government, the Government knew that they could not command its support, and would have lost the vote. That is significant, because the confidence and supply agreement itself has to come before the House to be debated. Again, it takes the courts to tell the Government what parliamentary democracy means. Worse still, the Government then decided, during the conference recess, that the Opposition’s policies on those two subjects would be their policies. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) will know that the Government made a statement on both policies.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned a journalist who is well known around the House, and who suggested that the Government were
not intending to vote against or amend our motions, but would sit on their hands for all our Opposition debates.

Mr Symns: The hon. Lady has been in the House for long enough to know that many things are debated here. Ten-minute rule Bills are let through because they raise an issue, and motions are sometimes passed by a few Members during Back-Bench business debates because, again, they raise an important issue. Is it not right that the Government make their own decisions about what they will oppose and what they will not oppose? At the end of the day, that is a choice for the Front Bench. If, politically, Members think that that is a bad thing to do, let them have their Standing Order No. 24 and make the point, but ultimately what we vote for is down to the Cabinet and the Whips Office, and that is our choice.

Valerie Vaz: This is a debating Chamber, and this is a revising Parliament. Members can table motions, and then people can see what policy comes out. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), the deputy shadow Leader of the House, persuaded the Government to take on board the need for a new piece of legislation, and that is how we do things here. Ministers listen, they take on board what happens, and then we move forward. That is what I am trying to say.

Mr Bone: I agree with much of what the hon. Lady is saying. This debate is about Parliament v. the Executive, and it is right that it is urgent, because the issue needs to be discussed. Does she agree, however, that Parliament voted, and therefore the Government should take note of whatever Parliament decided on that day and respond to it? She will agree, I hope, that if the Opposition had wanted to engineer a vote on that day, it would have been quite possible. I do not think we should misrepresent the matter for the Government to decide whether they vote. Will the Government continue to treat Opposition motions as decisions of the House, as though they were wearing an invisibility cloak? Will the Leader of the House resolve this with Mr Speaker and find a way forward on substantive motions of the House?

Mr Harper: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Valerie Vaz: No, because I am nearly finished, and the right hon. Gentleman has had plenty of time.

This makes a mockery of Parliament. Parliament is a forum for debate, discussion and amendments, as seen in the example given by the excellent Minister, Phil Woolas, who listened to the House, even though he was ambushed by a celebrity, and changed his policy—whether or not that was the right thing to do. Nevertheless, he said, “I have listened to the House.”

Finally, in the preface to “Erskine May”, the guide to the law, privileges, proceedings and usage of Parliament, there is a dedication to you, Mr Speaker. It entrusts you with the great responsibilities of guardianship of the parliamentary system. You have done that many times in this House, and in granting this debate. I ask you to convey to the Government that they must abide by that dedication.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Mr Stephen Hammond.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon, but I think the Leader of the House was intending to come in next. Am I right?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Mr Speaker, it is entirely a matter for the Chair.

Mr Speaker: It most certainly is a matter for the Chair. The right hon. Lady does not have to be difficult about it. What I was seeking to establish is whether she is an eager speaker; if she is, she can speak, and if she is not, she will not. It is pretty straightforward. Frankly—let me just say this—the Government Front Bench and the Opposition Front Bench should have sorted this out between them in advance of the debate. It was a degree of cack-handed incompetence that they did not do so.
**Andrea Leadsom:** Mr Speaker, I can absolutely assure you that, as in all things, my office was assiduous in coming to the Speaker’s Office to request that we speak straight after the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael)—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Leader of the House really ought to know by now that these matters are dealt with differently on different occasions and that there are precedents either way. What we know is that the right hon. Lady has the opportunity to speak, and quite a full opportunity, and therefore nothing of which to complain. The Leader of the House.

3.49 pm

**Andrea Leadsom:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Parliamentary procedure is of vital importance to our democracy, and it is taken very seriously on both sides of the House, so I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate, which is of course the 14th hour we have spent debating parliamentary procedure in the 26 sitting days since the general election, and apparently all because of a tweet. Well, I am sure that the nation is glued to the Parliament channel.

In response to the right hon. Gentleman’s accusation that the Government are not listening, I want to set out some steps that we have recently taken to speed up scrutiny and to respond to requests from Members on both sides of the House. First, the Select Committees were established early—quicker than in both 2010 and 2015—and all parties worked quickly to hold elections so that Committees could begin their important work in the September sitting. I was also delighted to ensure that the Backbench Business Committee was established at the same time so that Members would have another channel for scrutiny, and I am pleased to announce that the first Back-Bench debates will be held next week.

Secondly, a sitting of the House was extended for the Second Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to allow many Members to speak about that important legislation. Thirdly, we have allocated eight full days in the Chamber, each with eight protected hours of debate, for that Bill. Those 64 hours are in contrast to the rather more miserable 39 hours and 17 minutes that were spent ratifying the Lisbon treaty.

Fourthly, we have provided Government time for specific debates following requests from Members. The issue of illegal Traveller encampments has been raised by Members on both sides of the House at every business question since I became Leader of the House, and this week is Baby Loss Awareness Week—a truly tragic issue that affects many people across the UK—so it is right that we have found time to debate both important subjects. I have extended today’s sitting because I also want to make the House aware of work away from the Chamber to address Members’ real concerns about the increased volume of secondary legislation during this Session. The Government are aligning their approach to secondary legislation with their approach to primary legislation. The Cabinet Committee that I chair that oversees all primary legislation will now also oversee all secondary legislation. This will manage the flow and quality of statutory instruments more proactively, giving Parliament a much better service and enabling better scrutiny.

Let me address the specific points made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland about the subjects of the two Opposition day debates in September. The Government took full part in those debates. The Government matched the Opposition speaker for speaker. Notably, as was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), the Liberal Democrats failed to put up a single speaker in the tuition fees debate and put up only one in the NHS pay debate. Senior Ministers, on the other hand, were present on the Front Bench and made substantial contributions. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and for Education both opened their debates, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation closed them.

On Second Reading of the Finance Bill the day before, however, there were only five Opposition contributions—three from Labour; none from the Liberal Democrats. In contrast, we heard 17 Back-Bench speeches from Conservative Members, including 12 in a row. In fact, such was the extent of our engagement on that important Bill that the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) even made a point of order suggesting that we might be filibustering our own Finance Bill.
The vital issues of NHS pay and tuition fees have been thoroughly debated in this House in recent weeks.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I spoke in the NHS debate in favour of the motion, so I was very pleased that the Government supported it. I can only assume that Opposition Members are so unhappy because they lost an opportunity to beat the Government with a political stick.

Andrea Leadsom: Of course my hon. Friend is exactly right. Opposition Members wanted us to oppose, not support, which was what happened on the day.

Lady Hermon rose—

Andrea Leadsom: I will not give way to the hon. Lady again.

In addition to the Opposition day debates, there has already been an emergency debate on tuition fees, as well as Government statements, urgent questions from the Opposition and Westminster Hall debates on those subjects.

The Government take their duties in this House very seriously, but I am afraid that those Opposition day motions were meant for party political point scoring. Labour has form in promising everything but not delivering. The party misled students before the general election when the Leader of the Opposition said he would deal with student debt—a £100 billion commitment—only for his shadow Education Secretary to have to admit following the election that that was just an aspiration. Aspirations are not good enough; it is deeds that matter. It is only this Government—a Conservative Government—who can be trusted to deliver strong public services while sorting out the disastrous public finances left to us by Labour.

Mr Carmichael: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will not.

Do the Opposition even understand why the country has £1.7 trillion of debt?

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for giving way at last. What the House needs to hear from her is whether the votes on 13 September were one-offs, or if we should expect routinely and frequently to hear from the Government that, when they are going to lose a vote, they will simply avoid that by avoiding a Division.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will obviously want to check his Twitter account for the answer to that one, since he checked it for the initial answer. The Government take these issues extremely seriously. I am trying to explain why we chose not to vote on those political point scoring Opposition day motions.

To this day, I hear Labour suggesting that austerity is a choice or that we have deliberately increased public sector debt, but the fact is that in Labour’s last year in office, the Treasury spent £153 billion more than it received in taxes. The House will recall the note left by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) saying that there was no money left, which was a painfully honest statement from a Labour politician. In the seven years since, we have managed to reduce that overspend from £153 billion a year to £45 billion last year, but it is that annual overspend that increases debt, which now stands at £65,000 per household in this country. The only way to start tackling the debt is by first getting rid of the overspend. If we do not tackle it, it will be our children and grandchildren who will pay, but we do not hear Labour telling young people these truths.

Toby Perkins: I have no idea how that last paragraph has anything to do with the debate that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) has secured, so let me bring the Leader of the House back to the matter in hand. Having just had a general election in which the Prime Minister ran away from debates, but then at the end claimed there were no serious debates during the election, it is deeply significant that the things we debate in this Parliament and the votes we have here matter. Will the Government therefore simply make a commitment that they will not treat Opposition day debates in the same way as they have treated Back-Bench debates? That is all we want to hear today.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman say he has no idea what that last paragraph represented because I was seeking to explain why this Government are not playing Labour’s party political games. The Opposition do not face up to the reality of the mess they left this country in, and our children and grandchildren will end up paying for their mess unless we can get back to living within our means. That means that in their party political motions we chose to leave them to their games. Conservative Members will always balance the need for fairness to our superb public sector workers with the need for fairness to the next generation.

Mr Bone: There has been a lot of re-running of our previous debate, but I wish to go back to the principle of the thing. If this House expresses an opinion, be it in a Backbench Business Committee debate or an Opposition day debate, it is the Government’s duty to respond to that. Will the Leader of the House therefore undertake that the Government will reflect on whatever decision the House makes and come to make a statement—say within the month—giving their view about or response to what the House has decided?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but I am trying to explain that that is exactly what the Government are doing in those debates by matching up speaker for speaker to ensure that Back-Bench speakers get their views heard, with Secretaries of State opening the debates and senior Ministers closing them, and by taking account of and listening to Members’ views. It cannot possibly be the case that the Opposition can require Government Members to vote against a motion in order to prove that they were listening—what a daft thesis that is.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I am listening to the Leader of the House with great interest, just as I did to what the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) said. He seemed to suggest that the Government chose not to vote on those motions—certainly the first one—because the Government were in agreement.
and the debate was a political one about what “fair” meant, but she seems to be saying something different about whether or not there is political game playing. Will she confirm that when the Government disagree with the words of a motion, even if they disagree because of political purposes, they will vote against it? Will they vote against any motion whose words they disagree with?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is trying to put words into my mouth and to make me disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean, with whom I absolutely agree. This House expressed a view; what she and other Opposition Members want to do is to force the Government to oppose. The reason why they want the Government to oppose is so that they can then put out a press release that the Government oppose fair pay for public sector workers. That is what this is all about. I am saying that the Government sent their best, most senior Ministers along to take part in the debate and our Back Benchers fully took part in it. We listened, we heard what was said on all sides of the debate, we took part fully, and then we chose to allow those motions to go through unchallenged. That is a completely different issue. This House expressed a view and the Government are listening, but we will not necessarily always choose to take part in party political games. That is what this was, and the Labour party needs to accept its responsibility for the financial mess that means that Conservative Members have to get us out of the economic disaster that they left us. There is just no denying the truth of Margaret Thatcher’s words when she said:

“Socialist governments traditionally do make a financial mess. They always run out of other people’s money.”

She said that in 1976—it was true then and it is still true today.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to take part in the debate and to set out for the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and the Opposition the Government’s strong record on encouraging scrutiny in this House and our deep respect for Parliament. Our Parliament is admired the world over for the way in which it gives the Opposition the opportunity to conduct fierce and effective scrutiny of Government—on Second Readings, in Committee, on Report, on Opposition and Backbench Business Committee days, in Adjournment debates, in Westminster Hall debates and on the Select Committee corridor.

The reason why scrutiny matters is precisely because the Government are listening. That is what this Government have been doing, and it is what they will continue to do. I look forward now to moving on to the more substantive business of the day and debating the issues that really matter to people.

4.5 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Here we go again: another attempt by the Government to play fast and loose with the democratic arrangements of the House. This is clearly becoming a pattern, and the nation is starting to get really concerned and anxious about their casual disregard of many parliamentary conventions and scrutiny.

First, we had the horror of the grotesque Henry VIII powers in the repeal Bill. Then we had the Government fixing the Standing Committees of the House so that they could have a majority in each and every single one of them. Now we have all this nonsense about Opposition day debates and what the Government will or will not do in response to them. I think that I have identified the problem with this particular Government: they cannot accept their status as a minority Government. That is the basis of what we have here. They seem to be doing everything possible to try to deny that new reality, but the harder that they do that, the worse it gets for our democratic proceedings and parliamentary structures.

The Government have 317 Members out of a total of 650 Members—48.7% of the membership of the House. They are clearly a minority Government. Instead of fighting that reality, why do they not simply embrace it and accept it, then we can all get on with our business normally, with a minority Government trying to govern in this country?

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, particularly as he is speaking about minority Governments which his party now is in Scotland. When the Scottish National party had a majority Government in Scotland, it passed the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012. More than a year ago, when it was in a minority Government, it was defeated by all the opposition parties in a vote and called on to repeal the Act. Can he tell me the status of that? Has his party repealed the Act, or is it failing to respect the Scottish Parliament vote?

Pete Wishart: I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning that point. I was going to come on to that, because it is really important to understand how minority Governments respond to defeats in Parliament. The right thing to do is what the Scottish Government do, which is to review, reflect and consult. Let me cite one issue as an example. We were defeated on fracking. What did we do? We did not attempt to ignore that vote. We consulted, reviewed and came back to Parliament with a ban on fracking. That is the responsible behaviour of a minority Government. I will take no lecture from the hon. Gentleman whose party’s commitment to democratic decisions extends to the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) not even voting in the European Union referendum.

There are certain things that a party has to learn when it is in a minority situation in Parliament. The first lesson is that, sometimes, Governments get beat. They get beat here and they get beat in the Scottish Parliament. That is a feature of minority Government and it is alright—it happens. It happens normally in Parliaments right across Europe. This Government should not overly fret about it. They paid £1.25 billion to the Democratic Unionist party to ensure that they had a majority in the event of a threat to their existence. This House must also recognise how we can represent and reflect the democratic will of the people of this country. Sometimes I enjoy being lectured by Conservative Back Benchers about parliamentary sovereignty.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman has twice mentioned sovereignty and respecting the will of the people. Does he respect the will of the people in the two referendums
that have recently taken place—one in Scotland, and one on the European Union?

Pete Wishart: I will tell the hon. and learned Lady what I think about the will of the people. I was elected just a couple of months ago—I won an election. The gentleman I beat in that election is now in the House of Lords as an unelected Scottish Office peer. That is how to reject democracy: that is how to play fast and loose with the will of people—rejected one minute and ennobled the next. So I will take no lectures from the hon. and learned Lady.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am one of the people as well, and I will conduct my voting in this Chamber entirely on the basis of my own opinion and my own conscience. I decide when and how I vote, not the Government, and on the occasion in question, I chose to deploy my vote accordingly. I was in agreement with the first motion, because the lead I tend to take from my Front Bench was in agreement with it. Why would I therefore choose to oppose it? On the second motion, although I was against the sentiments being expressed, it was clear to me that, in accordance with the statute, however I expressed my opinion, it would make no difference. That is the matter in a nutshell.

Mr Speaker: Order. I exercised some latitude for the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), not least in light of his starring performance this morning, when he asked the most succinct question, but that was a mini-speech rather than an intervention. I simply take this opportunity to remind the House that the debate can last until three minutes past 6. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has not taken up a great deal of time so far, so this is not directed specifically at him, but I simply make the point that if Members want to speak, they should try to help each other, and that means refraining from, dare I say it, lengthy or self-indulgent interventions.

Pete Wishart: What would we have done without the contribution from the right hon. Gentleman? He does what he wants, as he always has done, and he should make sure he always does that in the future.

I got a bit sidetracked there with the very interesting intervention from the right hon. Gentleman, but I want to come back to this notion of parliamentary sovereignty, which is something my friends on the Conservative Back Benches hold dear. It is about expressing the will of the people in this House. Parliamentary sovereignty is the be-all and end-all—Conservative Members are even committing this great indulgence of economic, cultural and political self-harm by leaving the European Union so they can have more parliamentary sovereignty. They should start to demonstrate their commitment to it by recognising that this is a minority Parliament. We are here to serve all the people of the country, and we have to have arrangements to make sure we properly reflect that.

The Government seem to see not being defeated as some sort of virility symbol, as if being defeated shatters their delusion that they somehow have a majority. When it comes to these issues, the Government will have to stop behaving so arrogantly; they will have to accept their minority status and act with a bit of humility. They went to the people a few short months ago to ask for a mandate and for an increase in their majority; that is what it was all about—they wanted to take advantage of what they saw as the situation in the Labour party. What happened? They came back as a minority—they lost their majority—so maybe responding with a little less arrogance and a little more humility would do them some good.

The second principle of minority Government is that you sometimes have to work harder to get your way. That, again, is what happens in other Parliaments, but we have seen no example of it from the Leader of the House today. There is no point the Government trying to bludgeon their will through in Parliament, as they are currently doing; it is much better to negotiate and make deals to ensure they get solutions. I thought that that was what we were going to get. I will not break the confidence of the Leader of the House by talking about my meetings with her, except to say that when I had my first conversation with her, I was encouraged by what she had to say about her approach to Parliament. She talked about a basis of consensus—trying to get agreement and progress legislation and motions through Parliament on the basis of agreement—but all that seems to have gone. I wish we had the earlier Leader of the House instead of the one who is standing here now.

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman talks about consensus and agreement, but that is exactly what we reached during that Opposition day debate, and Opposition Members are still not happy.

Pete Wishart: I will move on to Opposition day debates, because I know that is the intended topic of the debate. I do not really understand the Government’s position. Opposition days are a real feature of Parliament. I have been in the House for 16 years and I have always enjoyed Opposition day debates. There is always a bit of tension and there are always good speeches, and they tackle subjects that Governments would not normally bring to the House because they might just get embarrassed—subjects with which they might be uncomfortable. They play an important function in the House, and it is really important that we do not lose sight of their role. The most important thing about Opposition day debates is that they have a conclusion: some sort of decision on the motion is taken by the House. The day that the Government play fast and loose with that arrangement is the day that we really devalue Opposition day debates. We have Backbench Business debates and Adjournment debates. We do not need glorified Adjournment debates; we need real debates that hold the Government to account, and on which we can make a decision and then move on, respecting that decision.

We accept that the votes in question are not binding on the Government. The Scottish National party are a minority Government in Scotland and we know exactly how these things happen: we will get beat, and this Government will get beat. The key thing is that nobody expects them to change their policy or direction on certain issues just because they get beat on a Labour party Opposition day motion—that is the last thing people expect. Nevertheless, the votes on such motions reflect the will of the House, so people expect the Government to respond in a particularly positive way. They should not try to avoid votes or dismiss debates; they should...
respond and say something. They should go back and consult, review their position and come back to the House with a new set of recommendations. That is what I think the people we represent want from Parliament and from the Government.

Mr Harper: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I think we have heard enough from the right hon. Gentleman. He took up about 25 minutes of the available time so I shall move on, if he does not mind.

We on the SNP Benches have a little experience of minority government: we are in our second parliamentary session as a minority Government. We had a minority Government with just two Members more than the second party, and now we are just two short of a majority. In each case we have tended to try to function as a minority Government, respecting the view that we do not have a majority and trying to work in consensus and partnership with other parties. The exercise we are doing around the budget is an example of how things can be done in a minority Parliament.

I mentioned fracking: it is important that we come back to the Scottish Parliament on that with another view. On other issues on which we are defeated, we will consult further and try to address the concerns. That is how we govern as a minority Government. I am happy to talk things through with the Leader of the House to help her to understand better. If she wants to come to the SNP, we can give her some lessons about running a minority Government. If she is having difficulty with it, which it seems she is, she can come and have a chat with us. I will not break the confidence of our meeting, as she did to me at the most recent business questions. She can come and have a chat and perhaps we can talk through some of the issues.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): As we have heard, it has been 12 months since the Scottish Government were defeated, and they are still at the consultation stage, whereas in the four weeks since the House expressed a view on the two motions in question, the Government have announced a policy change on the level of next year’s tuition fees, and they have announced different terms of reference for the public pay review bodies. The Government have done exactly what the hon. Gentleman has wanted. They have announced a policy change on the level of next year’s tuition fees, and they have announced different terms of reference for the public pay review bodies. The Government have announced a policy change on the level of next year’s tuition fees, and they have announced different terms of reference for the public pay review bodies. The Government have announced a policy change on the level of next year’s tuition fees, and they have announced different terms of reference for the public pay review bodies. The Government have announced a policy change on the level of next year’s tuition fees, and they have announced different terms of reference for the public pay review bodies.

Pete Wishart: I do not think the hon. Gentleman has been listening. I am not making any criticism of the Government—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] I am not! I am trying to give them some advice about how to do things and I am trying to get their minority status into their head. I am trying to help them to deal with that, so I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman listened to what I have said. It is good that they are reviewing things—that is what minority Governments do, and they should continue—but they also have to allow Opposition day debates to conclude and then vote on them and express an opinion. It is important that our constituents hear us in Parliament deciding on the important issues. It is important that they know our views, and the only way they are going to find out how we think about a particular issue or subject is if we vote on it. That is the only way they can determine it.

I do not know whether the Government intend not to vote on any further Opposition day motions, but I am not particularly interested in what Paul Waugh has to say in the Huffington Post on a particular day. I would like to hear it from the Leader of the House. Perhaps we can tempt her to say definitively, yes or no, whether she intends the Government to vote on Opposition day motions at some point. I will give her the chance to say whether it will be an option for the Government.

[Interjection.] She is shaking her head, or—

Andrea Leadsom indicated dissent.

Pete Wishart: She is not. That is good, and that is what we expected. All we needed to hear in this whole debate was the Leader of the House say to us, “Well, you know, we did that the first day because we thought we were playing a political game, but we’ll come back and we’ll vote on Opposition day motions.” We will get Opposition days; I would like to think that the Government would come along and vote on them.

We really have to start to get on top of all this. This has been a particularly bad start to the Parliament. I listened to the Leader of the House talking about all the things she did to put in place Select Committees earlier than usual. What utter, utter bunkum. Now that we are back for this long period in Parliament, with sittings right up to Christmas, let us start to show that we respect the political arrangements in the House—the structures and the way we have done things traditionally—and that we can still approach these issues collegiately and consensually, if we can.

The Government also have to get it into their head that they are a minority Government. We have seen no evidence of that yet. As we go through this Session, a little more of a demonstration of where the Government are just now would be useful and good. I hope that we do not have to have any more of these debates. I have been taking part in such debates almost every week for the past few months, and this is something we need to get over. We need to see the Government respecting their position and respecting the traditions of this House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: It might be helpful to the House to know that, in an attempt to accommodate everybody who wishes to take part, I am minded at this stage to put a seven-minute limit on each Back-Bench contribution. That inevitably is subject to change, but I hope that will not be necessary.

4.21 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this debate. Like perhaps a number of Members, I was somewhat surprised to find us debating this issue today, when there are so many other things we should be debating, but you are absolutely right, Sir. As the shadow Leader of the House said, you are entrusted with grave responsibilities, and it is only right, when a Member of this House makes what is effectively a substantive complaint against the Government—essentially,
that they disrespect this House—that you should call them to this House. I am grateful for that, because it allows those of us on the Government Benches to set out arguments that, as you will see, more or less demolish the proposition that has been put.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) quite rightly said that we need to look at the words of the motion, which says:

“That this House has considered the Government’s policy in relation to the proceedings of this House.

There seem to me to be two ways one can tackle the motion. The first is to look, as he did, forensically at the debates in question, which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) referred to yesterday. Anyone listening to my right hon. Friend’s speech would conclude that the Government clearly did not disrespect this House in any way.

There is another way of looking at this, which is to say, “What would be the basis for the charge?” There seem to me to be four things that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland could complain about. The first is, “Are the Government allocating enough days to Opposition debates?” Is he saying that the Government are not taking part? Is his charge that failure to vote is in some way a slight or a breach of convention? Or is he just saying that the Government are ignoring the Opposition motions?

The shadow Leader of the House complained in her speech about the number of times she has to ask for space for, so they cannot really claim that Opposition business is not being allocated the right number of days. Indeed, in the period 2010 to 2017, when the Opposition were entitled to 140 days, they were actually given 141 days. They were also given 24 more days in unallocated business that there was space for, so they cannot really claim that Opposition business is not being allocated the right number of days.

If the charge is about participation, then a number of colleagues from across the House have pointed out that they are participating, particularly on this side of the House. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said, on the day in question the Government fielded some of their most senior members. There were 11 speeches from the Opposition Benches and 10 from the Government’s, and in the second debate I think the figures were eight and 17. In both cases we had almost the same number of speeches, which seems to be the thrust behind some of the contributions today, does not stack up. If this was the only time made available to debate such matters, that would be serious. It is not, of course. Tuition fees have been debated during ministerial statements and urgent questions, and in Westminster Hall. The subjects have been thoroughly debated by this House, and the charge of non-participation seems to me to be very difficult to prove.

The Government, as the Leader of the House said, take their responsibilities very seriously. If the Opposition really believe there is a need for more scrutiny, there is a whole range of Opposition day debates, as you will see, more or less demolish the proposition that has been put.

Tuition fees have been debated during ministerial statements and urgent questions, and in Westminster Hall. The subjects have been thoroughly debated by this House, and the charge of non-participation seems to me to be very difficult to prove.

The charge of ambiguity is a serious one, but it does not hold up. The Government Front-Bench team answered that question when they responded to the motion, so I do not think that that charge can really be levelled against the Government.

In the short time that I have left, let me make the point that as a Government Back Bencher, I have experienced the frustration of sitting here with my colleagues until all hours of the night, only to find that no vote takes place. On the question of votes, it is for individual Members to make their minds up, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) said. We are elected here as individuals, and we can follow our wits, if we choose to do so. We are often urged to do so, and many people choose to do so, but it is for us to make that decision. Equally, it is for the Government to choose, motion by motion, when they should vote.

Finally, Opposition days can be used to raise matters of national importance, but all too often—not necessarily in this case—they are used for narrow party political posturing rather than a discussion of real quality. If a motion is about a matter of national importance, it is often phrased in a way that the Government find provocative or difficult to support. Many Governments have taken the view that they need to note what an Opposition day motion says, but ever since 1978, when the Conservative Opposition twice defeated the then Labour Government, it has become an established custom of this House that Opposition days are nothing
more than advisory, and that they are not actionable. Although the Government should take note of the motions and continue to debate the issues raised in them—I have no doubt that that will happen under my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—they are advisory and the Government are not bound by them in any way.

This has been an interesting debate, but what today has shown—my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean pointed this out—is that, in the case of the two debates mentioned by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, the charge does not stand. If we look behind the four possible arguments for saying that the Government are not listening on Opposition days, it is very difficult to contend that his proposition stands, so I hope Members will vote to defeat it this evening.

4.30 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) shows how little he understands the matter when he suggests that we will be voting on this, because we cannot vote on it.

We do not have a written constitution in this country, and that is why we need to be very careful about the way in which we operate our conventions. For instance, nowhere, even in statute law, does it say that the Prime Minister has to be a Member of Parliament—a Member of the House of Commons, or indeed a Member of either House of Parliament. That is not written down, but it is an accepted part of the way our constitutional settlement works.

That is why I say to Government Members, despite all the huff and puff today, that they need to be very careful about how they play around with the conventions at the heart of our political constitution. We have a system under which the winner takes all. If a party gets only 35% or 42% of the vote and does not have a majority of seats, if it manages to form the Government it gets to decide when Parliament sits, when the Queen’s Speech is, what is in the Queen’s Speech, what gets debated and how long it is debated for. The hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that we could add extra hours by debating programme motions. We cannot table a motion to add extra hours by debating programme motions. W e cannot table a motion setting works.

I worry that this is all part of a trend. Of itself, this is not the biggest issue in the universe—of course it is not—but it is part of a trend in this Parliament since, I would say, 2010.

The golden thread that runs through our parliamentary system is government by consent. It is not about the Government deciding everything because they have managed to take it all by winning, but about government by consent and the sovereignty of Parliament.

Whatever the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean says—he and I have had many debates over many years—the truth of the matter is that the Government knew they were going to lose the vote and that is why they decided not to vote. That was absolutely clear, and it was what all the Whips were saying throughout the day.

The latest trick that the Government are playing in this winner-takes-it-all system—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) really should not lead with his chin on that issue. Their latest trick is to increase the payroll vote in Parliament. In this country, we have more Government Ministers than France, Germany and Italy put together—or, indeed, than India, Pakistan and Australia put together. We have a vast number of Ministers. In addition, the Government now have 46 Parliamentary Private Secretaries, as well as 15 Government MPs who are trade envoys. All this is an exercise of patronage to make sure they hold on to power. If we look at the percentage of the governing party that that has represented since 1992, the interesting fact is that this is now the highest percentage ever, with more than 50% of Government MPs being part of the payroll vote. That is a despicable process for the Government to have adopted.

The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said that the Opposition should have tabled a motion early in the year, so as to prevent the student fees regulations from coming into force. But the convention of this House, which he knows perfectly well, has always been that if the Leader of the Opposition prays against a statutory instrument—secondary legislation—the Government will provide time, in Government time, on the Floor of the House for a debate and vote within the timescale, so that the legislation can be prevented from coming into force if that is the will of the House. The Government’s Chief Whip refused to do that. When I asked, and when the shadow Leader of the House asked repeatedly, when we were going to get that debate, we were met with a consistent refusal.

This is a big breach of our constitutional rights in this House. In the last 12 instances when the Leader of the Opposition has prayed against, only five have led to the granting of debates and votes, and three of those were debates in Committee, where even if every single member of the Committee, including the Government Whip, voted no, the legislation would still go through because all the Committee is allowed to consider, under our rules, is whether or not the matter has been debated.

Only the Government can introduce legislation and be certain to get it debated. Once a private Member’s Bill has been given a Second Reading, it can proceed further only if the Government table the relevant motions, even if it was assented to by the whole House or by a significant majority, as happened during the last Parliament. Only the Government can amend a tax or a duty, and only the Government can table motions in relation to expenditure. It is a case of winner takes all, and that places a very special responsibility on every single member of the governing party.

Stephen Hammond rose—

Chris Bryant: I am not going to give way to the hon. Gentleman. I have not even finished the point I was making.

Stephen Hammond rose—

Chris Bryant: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could just wait a moment. We do not get any extra time. If we use up time debating a programme motion, we are only taking time out of the main debate, so I will not give way to him on that point.

Stephen Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on a different point?

Chris Bryant: I am not going to give way to the hon. Gentleman. He should understand that I am not going to give way to him on that point.
In other words, it is the height of cheek—the most brass neck imaginable—to try to blame the Opposition for not providing time to debate statutory instruments laid down by the Government. That is why I say that hon. Members on the Government Benches should think very carefully about this business of whether the Government simply decide, when they think they are going to lose on a motion—a Back-Bench motion, an Opposition motion or any other kind of motion—to up sticks and say, “Oh well, it doesn’t really matter. It’s the kind of motion that doesn’t matter.”

There have been two other Back-Bench motions that I could cite in the last Parliament. One was on Magnitsky, tabled by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab); the other, tabled by the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), was on circus animals. The Government knew they would lose in both cases. They decided not to vote. So there was a unanimous vote in favour, and the Government have done absolutely nothing.

You should just beware. If you think we are Marxist Bolivarians, what will we do when we have these powers?

4.37 pm

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): This debate purports to be about an important issue. It accuses the Government of the day of flouting the rules of Parliament and it is true that if that were the case, it would be fundamentally objectionable, because we live in a parliamentary democracy, where Parliament makes the laws that regulate our society, and the rule of law provides that no one is above the law, including parliamentarians. It is not the Conservative party that threatens the rule of law; it is the Labour party, because Labour members have, time and time again, stated that they would condone the flouting of our laws, passed in this Chamber. They would condone illegal strikes supported by the trade unions. It is the shadow Chancellor, not Members on the Government Benches, who has threatened the rule of law and our democracy.

This is a debate about procedure, but it is not just a debate about procedure; it is also a debate where the premise is flawed. There is an objection that the Government do not vote on Opposition days, but as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland has brought a three-hour debate about this House on procedural matters about past debates. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland has brought a three-hour debate before this House at a time when there are many more important issues facing our country, such as Brexit—[Hon. Members: “He applied for it.”] He applied for it and Mr Speaker agreed to it. But the issues facing our country are Brexit, the economy, the NHS and education, issues that affect the daily lives of our constituents. It is those issues our constituents want us to discuss and not the procedure of this House.

4.41 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): This House is rather archaic. Many of these things I can live with: the pomp and circumstance, the wearing of funny clothes—I am one of those who wears their own style—and the walking around with a giant mace. What I cannot abide, however, is when rules and procedure are used, in what seems like an underhand way, to reduce the ability of constituents to hold us to account. Constituents can agree or disagree with their local Member of Parliament, but it is important that they know how their local Member of Parliament views an issue and how they vote on that issue that comes before them. Voting in that sense is a cathartic process: it allows us to support the process of democracy even if we do not support our particular representative. The problem with not bringing an issue to vote is that it undermines the very process of you, Mr Speaker, hearing the ayes and noes. That will lead to the Opposition forcing votes. It will lead to us wasting time unless it is clear that the silence on the Government Benches is a silence of approval, rather than a silence because they are afraid.

We have heard today that the Government agreed with the two motions, which is fantastic. [Interruption.] On the example we heard about earlier, the House agreed and the Government agreed. I applaud the Government on their turnaround. We heard earlier that in 2009 the Labour Government were defeated on the issue of the Gurkhas—the defeat was quite right in my view. On that very day, the Labour Government came to this House and made a statement on how they would change their course as a result of the vote of the House.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There is another example: the Conservative Government after the coalition were defeated on the vote over whether we
should bomb Syria. The then Prime Minister made a statement from the Dispatch Box to clarify the situation. His words were, “I get the message.” This Government have not got the message yet.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Exactly. It seems that the Government have not got the message that they should be accountable to this House. It is of course welcome that they have announced some minor changes—at the Conservative party conference and to the press lobby—on tuition fees and the public sector pay cap. But the problem with decree through press release is that it reduces the ability of this House to ensure that the detail of the vote-face is actually as the House wished.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): On a simple point of fact, the announcement on the public sector pay cap was a written ministerial statement. It is important that we do not pretend otherwise and that a Government who use legitimate procedures are not misrepresented.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Yes, but the suggested tuition fees amendment was not.

The subject of how we challenge statutory instruments is important in the light of our discussions on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I sat through a lot of those discussions and Government Ministers tried to reassure me time and again—not that they were very reassuring—that we should not worry about processes through the negative procedure. They said that we should not worry about statutory instruments because if the will of the House was clear, the House would have the opportunity to review and rescind, and to ensure that statutory instruments that overstepped the mark would not be allowed on the statute book. However, what we see here is parliamentary jiggery-pokery.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), although I must put it to him, given his comment about our constituents needing to know where we stand, that when my constituents contact me they always know where I stand. He also put it that the public are unclear about the view of the House. In respect of the two resolutions we are discussing, the House approved the motions, so it is very clear where the House stood. It expressed its view.

It is a pleasure also to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I respect his—I see he is busy.

Chris Bryant: I can do two things at the same time.

Jeremy Quin: He has the better of me. I was genuinely being respectful to the hon. Gentleman, whom I know thinks and speaks passionately about the conventions of this place. I am a relatively new Member, but I regard its role in our national life as very important.

I would not have sought to catch your eye, Mr Speaker, had I not looked carefully into the underlying principles of the application made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). First and critically, as he made clear in his application and as was reiterated by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), Opposition day motions, if carried, are not and never have been binding de jure on the Government. The precedents are clear. Between 1918 and 2015, there were 120 defeats of Governments, most of them on substantive legislative matters on which the Chamber was exercising its core constitutional role of creating and amending the law of the land.

On those occasions, however, when the Government lost a vote on a Supply day, the constitutional position was equally clear. I greatly enjoyed reading one such occasion—the debate on the devaluation of the green pound held on 23 January 1978. I was especially delighted to hear the two contributions, made from a sedentary position, by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), who I am sorry is not in his place. One was:

“Leave the Common Market. That is the answer.”

The other one was:


He is nothing if not a beacon of consistency. The Labour Government having lost the vote, there was no suggestion in the closing remarks of either the Opposition spokesman or the Minister that the decision would be binding on the Government.

This to me is core to the issue. Clearly, the House can amend primary legislation, including, critically, money Bills, and pray against secondary legislation, debating such matters either in Government time or on Opposition days. What we are discussing here, however, is not an attempt by the Opposition to amend legislation, but the manner outside legislation whereby the Opposition examine
and challenge Government policy. This, too, appears well established. The 1981 Select Committee on Procedure quoted, approvingly, an earlier Select Committee of 1966: “The real nature of Supply Days was the opportunity provided to the Opposition to examine Government activities of their own choice.”

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there are Backbench Business debates in the House that change policy, such as the baby loss debate, the subject of which we are in theory required. Good contributions are made to the workings of the House, those in Westminster Hall and, to a lesser extent, the work done in Select Committees, where good contributions are made to the workings of the House and policy examined without Divisions being required.

Chris Bryant rose—

Jeremy Quin: I am glad that I now have the hon. Gentleman’s attention.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman has always had my attention. It has been not far off the unanimous view of the House for some time now that we would like legislation on circus animals. Several hon. Members have tried to advance it, including the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) and, in the last Parliament, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), but on every occasion the Government systematically let the Backbench Business debate proceed and then had a vote on it, as if to suggest that something would then happen. When the House expresses a view, even if it is because the Government have refused to vote, I think that the Government should listen. Surely the hon. Gentleman must too.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman was very fortunate in his placing in the ballot for private Members’ Bills, so the solution to that problem may be in his own hands, although I understand that he believes that he will present more important business to the House, which I look forward to debating in due course. There are other means by which business can be debated, of which private Members’ Bills are but one.

In his application, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred to the motion on Gurkha settlement. I appreciate that he did so in all sincerity, and the subject was also raised by the shadow Leader of the House. The fact that the debate took place eight years ago may be indicative of developments in Opposition day debates over that period. The Labour Government did amend their position following that debate, but my recollection, like that of the shadow Leader of the House, is that there was a great deal more to that issue than what was said during the debate. I recall, as, I am sure, will other Members, the single-handed pincer movement—if such a thing is possible—that was inflicted on the Minister, Phil Woolas, by Joanna Lumley, and the phenomenal way in which she prosecuted the issue.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is not my hon. Friend’s case, in essence, that as long as the Government have the confidence of the House, when the House gives advice, it is for Ministers to decide how much of that advice to accept?

Jeremy Quin: It is undoubtedly the case that the Government should listen to the House and take the advice of the House, and must then decide themselves how to prosecute the business concerned, because they are accountable to the electorate and have that mandate.

The report of the Gurkha debate is intriguing. It was, I think, a unique case that arose eight years ago. The motion only got through this place because of—in the words of my right hon. Friend, the Member for Ashford (Damian Green)—“brave members of the Labour Party”.—[Official Report, 29 April 2009; Vol. 491, c. 989.]

The brave members of the Labour Party who supported the motion and defeated the Labour Government inevitably included the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and, obviously, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). Leading the Ayes was the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). Clearly Phil Woolas was a forgiving soul, as he subsequently nominated the right hon. Lady for the leadership of his party despite being a campaign manager for David Miliband, on the ground that “David wants to be inclusive”. I hope that moderate members of the Labour party will not get into the habit of nominating colleagues for the leadership of their party for the wrong reasons; who knows who they would end up with?

My view is that the Gurkha settlement debate was in a noble cause, far removed from the simple binary party-political debates in which the Opposition propose declamatory resolutions to spend taxpayers’ money without having the responsibility of funding those decisions. The Government must, of course, present Ministers to the House to defend and explain their policies, but on specific—and I mean specific—party-political issues, the Government believe that not trooping everyone through...
the division Lobbies is the right decision in the case of a non-binding, non-legislative resolution, and the Government must retain that right.

4.58 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I rise to make it clear that Members will be pleased to hear will be a mercifully short contribution. I am afraid that I must use some of my few minutes to correct something that was said by the shadow Leader of the House: I am sure that she would like that to be done at the earliest opportunity. She said that it was the Conservatives who introduced the Backbench Business Committee, but of course it was not. It was the coalition Government, consisting of Liberal Democrats and Conservatives. That followed the work that a Labour Member of Parliament, Tony Wright, had completed, but it is unfinished business. Let me pre-empt a possible intervention from the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who, I know, is pressing for the establishment of a Committee to resolve the way in which business is presented in this place. I hope that the shadow Leader of the House did not mind my correcting her on that point.

I thought that the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) was rather generous to the Leader of the House in saying that she could not possibly answer questions about business during business questions. That is her role, and I am sure that her predecessors Andrew Lansley and William Hague, with whom I worked, would have been very happy to answer a question on the subject of the business of the House.

The Government are clearly developing an addiction to closing down debate and scrutiny, or simply disregarding the outcome of any debates. We have heard a lot about Opposition day debates, so I will not touch on those. We have heard about the Government packing Committees to their advantage. We have heard a lot about the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, and rightly so, because of course there are Members of this place—they do not appear to be here today, with perhaps one honourable exception—who have preached at great length about the importance of parliamentary sovereignty, often repeating the same speech, but when it comes to that Bill their enthusiasm for parliamentary sovereignty appears suddenly to have evaporated and it is no longer the critical matter it used to be. We see that in the Henry VIII powers and in how much policy the Government intend to push through in secondary legislation.

I want to focus briefly on the 50 sectoral reports that the Government have commissioned on the impact of Brexit. Whether one is a remain supporter like me, or a leave supporter like the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), I think that we all agree that it is important that the Government go public on what the impact of Brexit will be. I feel that it will be very negative, and I am sure that he thinks that it will be very positive, but at the moment we do not know because we are not allowed to see those 50 reports, which the taxpayer has paid for.

I am afraid that situation is often reflected in answers to parliamentary questions on the subject. I would have thought that by now every Department would know how many pieces of EU legislation they were going to have to transpose into domestic law through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill process. However, if Members ask that in a parliamentary question, what answer do they get? Some Departments are willing to hazard a figure of between 800 and 1,000, as the Department for Exiting the European Union has done, but others have no idea and do not give an answer at all. I think that the Government are very scared about allowing Parliament to scrutinise the Brexit arrangements in full possession of the facts.

In conclusion, the Leader of the House has had many opportunities in this debate to clarify the Government’s position on Opposition days, but she has chosen not to do so. We are left with the rather nasty suspicion that this is a Government who care little about parliamentary conventions, less about parliamentary sovereignty and nothing at all about parliamentary sovereignty.

5.2 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I contribute to this debate from quite a privileged position, as someone who has served both my Parliaments: as a Member of the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood in Edinburgh; and as a Member of our Parliament here in Westminster in London. Of course, in both Parliaments, I have served under minority Governments, so I am well placed to speak about how Oppositions deal with debates in both Chambers.

We hear a lot from our Scottish National party colleagues about minority government here at Westminster, but very little about the fact that their party is in minority government in Holyrood—we heard a couple of sentences about it today from the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), but not much before that. It is therefore worth repeating that Nicola Sturgeon went into the last Scottish parliamentary elections with a majority and came out with a minority, largely because the number of Scottish Conservative MSPs more than doubled—from 15 to 31.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire said many interesting things. After 13 minutes of criticising and attacking the Government and Conservative Back Benchers, he told us that he was being helpful and consensual. That was the only helpful thing he told us, because up until that point it did not seem that he was being particularly helpful or consensual. He also said—I wrote this down because I was very interested—that nobody expects the Government to change policy after being defeated in an Opposition day debate. That was quickly followed by an intervention from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who disagreed entirely. That just shows the confused position among the Opposition parties in today’s debate. It is perhaps because the party of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has a minority Government in Scotland that he does not believe that Governments should change policy due to a defeat in a Chamber.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It is nice to hear about the Scottish example, but I am interested to know whether the hon. Gentleman thinks that the Government should change course when they are defeated in a Chamber, instead of just hearing him attack the SNP, which I do not have much truck with either.

Douglas Ross: I am a Scottish Conservative Member representing a Scottish constituency, so if the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will speak about Scottish
issues in the House of Commons. I will also speak about Governments being defeated when this Government are defeated. They have not been defeated in this House, but the party of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has been defeated. I want to come on to the point that I tried to make when I intervened on his speech. Hansard will show that I asked clearly about the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012, but that the hon. Gentleman never once mentioned that piece of legislation in response.

**Pete Wishart:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Douglas Ross:** Yes, if the hon. Gentleman is now going to tell me what has happened to that piece of legislation that needed to be repealed.

**Pete Wishart:** It is interesting that all that Theresa's Scottish Tories ever do is to get on their feet and talk about the Scottish Parliament. In case it has evaded the hon. Gentleman's attention, he was elected to serve in this House. As for the 2012 Act, a review is under way about the Scottish Parliament. In case it has evaded the Scottish Tories ever do is to get on their feet and talk about Governments being defeated when this Government are defeated. They have not been defeated in this House, but the party of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has been defeated. I want to come on to the point that I tried to make when I intervened on his speech. Hansard will show that I asked clearly about the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012, but that the hon. Gentleman never once mentioned that piece of legislation in response.

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**Douglas Ross:** I am sorry, but as the hon. Gentleman has totally misunderstood what is happening in Scotland with this piece of legislation, it is important that I provide a potted history of what happened. It was introduced by a majority SNP Government in 2011 with no support from the Opposition parties. Legal experts told them that it was wrong, a senior judge went on to say that the legislation was “mince”, and then a Labour MSP’s consultation on repealing the legislation attracted 3,000 responses, 70% of which said that the Act should be repealed. What is happening now? I will tell you. In November last year—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Gentleman held out the prospect for the House that he would provide a potted history of what had happened in relation to the relevant piece of Scottish legislation. I think that he has somewhat stretched the definition and meaning of the word “potted”, and what I am politely indicating to the hon. Gentleman is that he should gravitate towards the thrust of the debate, rather than occupy the tramlines.

**Douglas Ross:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. You unfortunately stopped me mid-thrust because I was about to come to that point. The final element came in November last year, when I led a debate on the matter in the Scottish Parliament, which then voted to repeal the 2012 Act. The Opposition parties voted for the repeal, but nothing has happened in the past year. The point that I am trying to get across is that people cannot state that what the Opposition parties say here must be respected when they do not respect what such parties say in another Parliament, so I will take no lectures from the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire about that.

Parliament gave a view on the two motions that prompted today’s debate. There was a full discussion, with Government Members matching Opposition Members speaker for speaker, and the House did not dissent from the motions. The House expressed an opinion. Our constituents would be better served by our getting on to those debates, which I look forward to listening to in the near future.

5.9 pm

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for his contribution, but I promise to confine my remarks to affairs of this House. I apologise to colleagues who, like me, perhaps thought that they had nodded off and woken up somewhere else. It is almost exactly four months since we were all elected to this place—many of us for the first time—on a pledge to serve our constituents and the country, but I find myself increasingly dismayed by the attitude and flagrant disrespect for the values of the democratic process that are displayed by those on the Government Benches. First we were presented with the Henry VIII power grab in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, and now it seems that the Government intend simply to allow Opposition days to happen and then ignore them, paying no respect to the views of the House, elected Members or, by extension, the electorate who sent us here to oppose and scrutinise. It is not good enough, Mr Speaker, and if we continue along those lines, we will not be serving democracy.

At the moment, politicians spend a lot of time debating and lamenting public apathy, searching for ways to engage the younger generation, and asking why they find so little in the work we do to spark their enthusiasm for public service. Perhaps we had our answer, or at least part of it, during the Opposition day on 13 September, with its debates on NHS pay and tuition fees—hardly unimportant issues. If any young person was visiting the House on that day or watching the TV coverage, what did they witness? Petty political game playing—not dissimilar, I have to say, from what we have seen from those on the Government Benches today.

**Alex Chalk:** In my experience in this House, Opposition day motions are all too often used as an opportunity to lay party political traps that end up misleading my constituents. Does the hon. Lady agree that, in those circumstances, the Government should take the discretion not to indulge in parliamentary game playing?

**Christine Jardine:** I would agree with the hon. Gentleman were it not for the fact that what he was doing was party political game playing rather than listening to the Opposition. Surely the point of an Opposition day debate is that the Government listen to a view other than their own. That is the view of the electorate—they think that we are here to serve them, rather than to play games. If they had tuned in on the 13th, they would have seen a Government simply paying lip service to the question with no intention of taking anything on board or of allowing any credence to be given to the debate, lest it should challenge their established view.

**Mr Carmichael:** On that point, when the Government agree at least partially with an Opposition motion, it is open to them to table an amendment. They chose not to do so last month.

**Christine Jardine:** Indeed. Why should such behaviour encourage any kind of faith in the political process—“Yes, we’ll let you have your say, yes you can have a vote, but we won’t take any notice of what you say”?
Where is the democracy, where is the scrutiny and where is the respect for those who elected us? They surely deserve better.

5.12 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate and to follow the new hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). She helpfully reminded us that it is almost four months since the general election, but the point about the general election of which I want to remind the House is that on 8 June the people of this country—my constituents and everyone else’s constituents—had a vote, and the result was that the Conservative party got 56 more seats than the official Opposition. We have a working majority. The Queen’s Speech has already been approved, setting out—[Interruption.] Whether the Opposition like it or not, that sets out the legitimacy of this Government’s programme of work.

The Government also have a record of empowering Parliament, as we have heard throughout the debate, and that means Back Benchers, too. As we have heard, in 2010 it was the Conservative-led coalition Government who established the Backbench Business Committee, which is really important for Back Benchers on both sides of the House. When I sat on that Committee, I saw the range of topics proposed by Members of all parties for discussion. In the couple of years in which I have been a Back Bencher, we have had interesting and useful Back-Bench debates in the Chamber.

Chris Bryant: My only point there is that it is a bit of a pain if we cannot make the debates mean anything because the Government decide to abstain from any vote and not to follow through on a decision of the House. There is an important difference here. Although the Government did not fully implement this from the Wright proposals in 2010, despite promising to do so by 2013, we could have, as the Scottish Parliament has, a parliamentary bureau to decide all the business of this House. Would the hon. Lady support that?

Wendy Morton: I just go back to my point about Backbench Business Committee debates, because they have an important place in this Chamber and can make a difference, as can general debates. We had a very meaningful and useful debate yesterday evening on Gypsies and Travellers, a topic that Members on both sides of the House had been raising—

Wera Hobhouse: rose—

Wendy Morton: I am going to make some more progress.

Members on both sides of the House had been raising the issue throughout the summer. Given the Minister’s statement at the end of that debate, I sincerely believe that the Government were listening and are pointing to some ways forward. As a Back Bencher, the issue concerns me in my constituency, so I will continue to press it, as I hope other Back Benchers will.

As we have heard, following this debate and another piece of business, we will have a debate on baby loss, which touches many people, again on both sides of the House. The issue has received a lot of awareness in the Chamber, starting from an Adjournment debate that was held a couple of years ago. We have had an Adjournment debate and Back-Bench debates. There is an all-party group on the subject and a ten-minute rule Bill on it was introduced. We have not had a vote as a result of any of those things, yet a private Member’s Bill is to be introduced on the subject. Let us hope that that legislation goes through this place and that we will be able to remember that it started from the Back Benches. That is not one of my private Member’s Bills. I have had two successes, but I would still like to think I could get a hat-trick.

All I am trying to do is to highlight the importance of debate in this place so that we have a chance to express our views. On the day in September that today’s debate is very much focusing on, I had that chance to make my views and thoughts on student tuition fees heard, and that was what I did. That does not have to mean that there will be a vote every time; I had my chance to have my say. What concerns me most is that we now spend 14 hours talking about procedure. I am not blaming you, Mr Speaker—far be it from me to do that; I would never be called to speak again! The fact remains that 14 hours have been granted for speaking about procedure, but what really matters is what my constituents want to hear. They voted in June for this Government and for me to get on with the job of representing them in this place and raising the issues that matter to them, not to talk about procedure.

5.18 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I wish to be brief, Mr Speaker. Let me thank you for accepting the debate proposed by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael).

I am particularly interested by this debate because I am a newbie in the House and still have a lot to learn. I arrived in Westminster very much of the view of Parliament being sovereign and this House of Commons reigning supreme. This Government’s blatant disregard for Parliament and for the fact that we are here to vote on issues that will impact the lives of the people who sent us here is a disgrace. If we think back to those two debates in September, it was clear that the Government knew they were heading for a big defeat—not for defeat’s sake, but because they are on the wrong side of history. Their weasel words on public sector pay show very little understanding of what is happening outside this place. The motion was very clear that any potential increase in tuition fees in England and Wales should be scrapped. It was clear, sensible and pragmatic. The failure to vote on the two Opposition day motions shows that the Tories are running scared. That is clear for everyone to see, including those outside this House.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) was right to note the deal between the Government and the Democratic Unionist party. If the 10 DUP members continue to support Opposition day motions—I sincerely hope that they do—what does that mean for agreement between the two parties?

I know that the Leader of the House is not a close friend of the Prime Minister, but a nice and easy answer to this would be to the benefit of the House. How stable is this Government and how can we have any faith in them when the £1 billion deal hangs by a thread?
Between January 1978 and September 2017, there was only one Government defeat on an Opposition motion in this House. I might have been a mere boy then, but I remember that the Government changed their policy the next day, rightly reflecting the expressed will of the House. When the Leader of the House winds up the debate, I hope that she will address that point.

I also think that the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) was on to something when he intervened on the former Government Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). I agree that when Parliament speaks, the Government should listen. I know that, deep down, Government Back Benchers agree with that statement, but they are running scared of the Whips and, more importantly, of facing the people in our constituencies and community centres, and across all four nations that make up our United Kingdom.

The way that the Government have approached Parliament since the election has been a disgrace. As the shadow Leader of the House noted in her important contribution, this two-year parliamentary Session was announced in a press release on 22 June. The Leader of the House should have come to this House, and she knows it. The failure to increase the number of Opposition day debates was a further disregard of Members.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we would not be spending 14 hours discussing democracy if it were not for Government Members disregarding democracy?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I agree with that.

In many ways, this debate is silly. I say that because there are so many important issues facing my constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill and others across Scotland and the rest of the country. We should be doing more. We could be talking about the pressures faced by our hospitals and vital public services, the fact that the jobcentre closures by the Department for Work and Pensions have the potential to destroy livelihoods and the vitality of town centres around the country, the botched roll-out of universal credit that even John Major wants halted, and, of course, Brexit, which will affect everyone.

The Government should be ashamed of themselves. They should learn that, ultimately, this House is sovereign—

Mr Jim Cunningham: I was very interested in the justification from the Leader of the House for the Government’s actions on those two votes. We noticed that she sloganised for Conservative Central Office by blaming the last Labour Government for running the country into debt when she knows that it was her friends, the bankers in America, who caused the problem.

Hugh Gaffney: All I know is that I am skint and that I agree with my hon. Friend.

As I said, the Government should be ashamed of themselves. They should learn that, ultimately, this House is sovereign. Rather than engaging in this playground approach of sticking their fingers in their ears and ignoring the strong and loud voices of Members from all parties, they should show a bit of respect—that is all we ask for.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are three remaining would-be contributors. The way that things have worked out means that we have slightly more time—[Interruption.] Yes, I know that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will be sad that it did not happen for him, but we have heard him many times before, and we will hear him many times again. The limit will now be eight minutes per Back-Bench speech. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene all over the place because he enjoys the mellifluous sound of his own voice, we will wait in eager anticipation of that prospect.

5.24 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I would say to the new hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) that if he thinks this Government are bad in relation to Parliament, he should have seen the Blair Government. However, I have a hint that we may be friends, because I think he said something nasty about Whips, which is always a good sign for a new relationship.

I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this Standing Order No. 24 debate, which is about Parliament versus Government. It is impossible for us as Back Benchers to get this issue debated, so I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for introducing it. Although there was a little party politics on the Opposition Benches, there were also some very good speeches about parliamentary sovereignty, and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said everything I would have said—which is worrying me and probably worrying him.

There were some arguments today that were just plain wrong. The argument that this time is taking up time we could be using to debate something else is nonsense. We can extend the parliamentary day, and we have extended it. We could have extended the parliamentary day by three hours today. The Government chose to introduce two statements today, which took up parliamentary time. So the argument is completely false.

There is nothing more important than discussing the sovereignty of Parliament and the rights of Parliament in relation to the Executive. The Executive control virtually everything, and legislation can, effectively, be brought forward only by the Government. We talk about private Members’ Bills, but if we pass a private Member’s Bill on Second Reading and the Government do not provide a money motion, it is completely stuffed. So everything is completely in the control of the Government.

The fact that the Backbench Business Committee was introduced—it came out of the Wright reforms, although its debates were supposed to be in prime time, not stuck on a Thursday—is a credit. However, I remember sitting next to the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, in the Tea Room and saying, “Isn’t it wonderful, Prime Minister, that we have a Backbench Business Committee and substantive motions the House can vote on?” He was having a cup of tea, and he spluttered it all over the place—he had not quite realised that point. However, there is no point having a substantive motion and having the will of the House expressed on a particular issue if the Government then choose not to take action. In my view, the Backbench Business Committee is the thing that has been ignored the most.
We have to come to a situation where, if the House expresses a view, a Minister must respond to that view in a statement. On the two debates that are being discussed, it does seem that the Government have changed policy subsequently, which is good, but would it not have been better if a Minister had come to the House and said, “As a result of that debate, we have thought about the issue, and this is what we propose to do”? I would like to suggest to the Leader of the House that it becomes a formula that if the House expresses a view, the Government should respond to it. That does not mean that they have to accept everything, but they should come to the Dispatch Box and say what they are doing on the issue.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thought the day would never come when a newbie Lib Dem would agree with the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), but I like the cut of his jib. I think there is something more dangerous here, and I will probably incur the wrath of the House by turning to the territory of the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), but in the place where I once served for 12 years, we had private Members’ debates of an evening, to which a Minister would reply and after which, to be honest—I have to be careful about parliamentary language—damn all happened. That was dangerous for democracy in Scotland because the general public started to lose faith in the purpose of that kind of debate, and when we lose that, we are in danger of losing something incredibly important.

Mr Bone: I am grateful for that intervention, but may I give the new Liberal Democrat Member some advice? He should never agree with me if he wants to progress in his party.

Let me go back to another false argument that was used today. There was criticism of the Liberal Democrats for not being here for certain votes, and I have on occasion pointed that fact out in this Chamber. However, if we extend that to say that only people in this Chamber who know what the debate is about can go and vote, we would have quite a lot of different results in this House. It is not a bad idea.

A business of the House committee would solve a lot of these problems. That was proposed by Wright. It was supported; it was Government policy. Unfortunately, it was not Whips’ policy, and that is both lots of Whips. Many of the problems we have would be solved by having such a committee.

I am not sure whether anyone from the Government will be winding up the debate, but it would be useful to have a commitment from them on this matter. On an Opposition or a Backbench business day, if the House votes on something—we did vote; it is just that no one opposed the motion, so there was no recorded Division—that is the will of this House of Parliament and we should have a Government response.

Mr Harper: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Bone: Give way to a former Chief Whip? Alright.

Mr Harper: Presumably, my hon. Friend is asking the Government to say something only if the House votes for something that is counter to the Government’s existing policy. My argument was that the motion on the NHS was completely consistent with the Government’s policy, which is of course why the Government did not oppose it.

Mr Bone: I am grateful to the former Chief Whip for his intervention. As usual, he will not expect me to say anything other than that I completely disagree with what he said. I am saying that, if the House expresses a view, a Minister should come to the Chamber. The Minister can stand up and say, “I absolutely agree with the motion”, if that is what it is, but that should happen if, on an Opposition day, on a substantive motion, the motion is carried.

The issue of circus animals is the best example we have had in the House. There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority in the House wanted something done about circus animals.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Bone: I am sorry, I do not think I have time to take another intervention.

We really do need this to be done: the Government must take notice of what the House decides. It is a fact that, when the Backbench Business Committee came into being, the Government used to take it seriously. They used to vote on the motion. Then a former Leader of the House decided that it would be a good wheeze just to ignore votes and carry on. The reason we did not vote against the motion on circus animals—we can deny it as much as we like—is that we would have been defeated. It would be good in this parliamentary democracy if the Government on occasion were defeated. It would not be the end of the world and the Government would take note of it. That lot on the Opposition Benches would cry about it, but so what? Let us get used to it. This is Parliament. The people sitting here are not members of the Government—they are MPs sitting on the Government side. No one tells me how to vote.

Mr Harper: That is true.

Mr Bone: The former Chief Whip knows that. If I had wanted to, I could have been the only one to oppose the motion on that particular day. However, I did not feel like that.

This is not a wasted debate. It is a chance for parliamentarians to say that Parliament should come first and the Government should listen to what the House says when it votes.

5.33 pm

Mr Carmichael: With the leave of the House, I shall say a few words. I would not often expect to say this, but it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). There was much in his speech with which I had little difficulty agreeing with. On the question of a business bureau for the House, again, that was in the Wright report. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman, however, that to proceed with that without looking at other areas of House procedure that require reform would not be sensible. There is a strong case for revisiting the remaining work to be done in respect of the Wright report.
Chris Bryant: Something suddenly springs to my mind. Was not the right hon. Gentleman the Lib Dem Chief Whip who prevented the parliamentary bureau from coming into force?

Mr Carmichael: Indeed, I was part of the Government then—I was the deputy Chief Whip at the time. That was a decision taken by Government as a whole. Of course I was part of that, as were other Ministers.

Others have said that this debate was unnecessary. On one view, I am not without sympathy for that opinion. The debate could have been avoided if the Leader of the House had given us a clear steer on Government policy when I raised this matter with her on 14 September at business questions. She could have denied that it was Government policy to avoid Divisions that they would lose and then to ignore the decision of the House on non-binding motions. She chose on 14 September not to do so. She was given the opportunity again today to deny that this was the Government’s policy. She chose again not to do so. If she wishes to intervene on me now to be clear, I will take her intervention.

Andrea Leadsom: I think I have been clear. The Government look case by case, and voting is a matter for the House. What the right hon. Gentleman is looking for is an assurance that those on the Government Benches will always oppose Opposition—

Mr Carmichael indicated dissent.

Andrea Leadsom: That is exactly what he is after, so that he can write his press releases. We will look, case by case, at Opposition motions and make decisions accordingly.

Mr Carmichael: I can assure the House that it has been some years since I wrote my own press releases. What I want is an assurance that where the House reaches a decision—this is the point that the hon. Member for Wellingborough made—that decision will be acted on and respected by the Government. We have had no assurance on that point for the third time today. The House will draw its own conclusion from that failure to deny.

From any Minister of the Crown, that would be regrettable. It pains me to say that, from the Leader of the House, who is supposed to be the House’s representative in Government, it is a dereliction of her duties. Those on the Treasury Bench can continue to avoid this issue if they wish, but if they do, it will keep coming back. Inevitably, because this is a democracy, the day will come when they are sitting on the Opposition Benches and somebody else is sitting where they are now. I fear that it is only then that they will understand the damage that they are doing to our House and our constitution now.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Government’s policy in relation to the proceedings of this House.

Mr Speaker: We shall shortly be proceeding to the next business, and I am keenly anticipating that, in a matter only of moments, the Clerk will proceed to read the Orders of the Day. However, in order for us properly to proceed with that business, there is a requirement for the presence of relevant Ministers and shadow Ministers, and—for I am not casting aspersions—there is also a requirement for an occupant of the Chair, as the House will be sitting in Committee and the Speaker does not chair the proceedings in Committee, as Members will know. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is gesticulating in a very gentle way from a sedentary position that the Minister is present on the Treasury Bench, and I am happy to acknowledge that. [Interruption.] The occupant of the Chair is here and I think others are also here. The Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders of the Day.
European Union (Approvals) Bill
Considered in Committee.

[Mrs Eleanor Laing in the Chair]

Clause 1

Approval of draft decisions under Article 352 of TFEU

5.39 pm

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss clause 2.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): This is a short Bill. As I explained on Second Reading, the purpose of the Bill is to approve four draft decisions of the Council of the European Union. All four draft decisions rely on article 352 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union, and therefore require the approval of Parliament. Section 8 of the European Union Act 2011 provides for exemptions in order to avoid the requirement for an Act of Parliament, but the decisions with which we are dealing do not fall within any of the exempt purposes.

The first two decisions will enable two countries, the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia, to be granted observer status in the European Union’s Fundamental Rights Agency. The third and fourth decisions are necessary to implement a co-operation agreement between the EU and Canada on competition enforcement. Clause 1 provides for approval by Parliament of those four draft EU legislative decisions. Clause 2 concerns the territorial extent of the Bill, its commencement date and short title. Subsection (1) provides that the Bill extends to the whole United Kingdom, subsection (2) provides that the Bill will come into force on the day it receives Royal Assent and subsection (3) provides for the Bill’s short title.

We are content that all four decisions are reasonable and proportionate, and that they will not result in any additional financial burdens on the UK. I urge hon. Members to agree to clauses 1 and 2 standing part of the Bill.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The European Union (Approvals) Bill is a two-clause Bill, as the Minister has said. It will approve four draft decisions of the Council of the European Union in relation to the participation of the Republics of Albania and Serbia as observers in the work of the Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the signing and conclusion of a new agreement between the EU and Canada regarding competition law, including the exchange of information between the EU and the Canadian Competition Bureau. Approval of those decisions by means of an Act of Parliament is necessary under the European Union Act 2011 in order for a Minister to vote in favour in the Council.

The Fundamental Rights Agency replaced the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia in 2007. In the former framework, and the main priority areas include the fight against racism, xenophobia and related intolerance. EU candidate countries can participate in the FRA as observers. The Bill approves two draft decisions on the participation of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia as observers in the FRA's work. We support the draft decisions concerning the participation of Albania and Serbia in the FRA.

Competition is vital to our economy, the success of our businesses and the prosperity of the people of our country, and the encouragement of healthy competition is vital. National Governments have a vital role in ensuring that a fair market exists, and not just a free market. The way in which Governments work together is also crucial in determining whether markets are free, fair or otherwise. The decision of the Trump regime to impose punitive tariffs on Bombardier will have a disastrous effect on the workers and communities of Northern Ireland, and on the economy. Such tariffs, if they are allowed to stand, exemplify the use by companies such as Boeing of market dominance to destroy competition.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am not sure that I like Donald Trump any more than anyone else does, but does the hon. Gentleman understand the difference between a regime and an Administration? He calls the Trump regime a regime, but in fact the Trump Administration is an Administration. It is a democratically elected Administration, not some sort of hard left Venezuelan or Cuban-style regime.

Bill Esterson: I do not think there is any danger of confusing Donald Trump’s Administration or regime with anything of the hard left.

That Boeing can act as it has done—initiating trade disputes in a segment in which it does not compete—with the full support of a protectionist US Administration demonstrates the need to ensure that every effort is made to deliver healthy and fair competition. The reliance of some Ministers on the US for trade and for our own economic success has been brought into sharp focus by the actions of the Department of Commerce. Notably, this applies to the International Trade Secretary, who seems to think that our relationship with the US is the answer to all our prayers, but it clearly is not.

5.45 pm

On Second Reading, the Minister told the House:

“The absence of the possibility of exchanging information with the Canadian Competition Bureau is regarded as a major impediment to effective co-operation. The proposed changes in the existing agreement will allow the European Commission and the Competition Bureau to exchange evidence that both sides have obtained in their investigations. That will be particularly useful in all cases in which the alleged anti-competitive behaviour affects transatlantic or world markets. Many worldwide or transatlantic cartels include Canada and, via Canada, the Commission will gain a good opportunity to have access to additional information concerning those cartels.”

I note that she also told us:

“The existing competition agreement with Canada does not allow the sharing of confidential information, but the new one does.”—[Official Report, 4 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 1048.]

Many people regard the actions of Boeing in pushing the US Department of Commerce towards levying 300% tariffs on Bombardier, a competitor with a technically
superior product, as a pretty strong example of the type of anti-competitive behaviour that the Minister spoke about on 4 July. Indeed, given Boeing’s battle with Airbus, it very much appears to be an attempt to destroy further competition in a market in which it has long been the dominant player.

The Canadian Government and the EU have both been working hard to address the actions taken to reverse the protectionist, anti-competitive actions of Boeing and the US Government. I trust the Minister will agree that any action to help all those connected with Bombardier in the UK, who are now fearing the worst, would be widely welcomed. The European Commission has noted that the absence of a power to exchange information with the Canadian competition authority is now an impediment as co-operation between the two parties has increased. Co-operation between the Canadian Government, the UK Government and the EU has never been more important, and what is happening at Bombardier is a reminder that such increased co-operation can only help.

Fair competition means avoiding anti-competitive practices, whether at home or abroad, including through the creation of cartels, or through mergers and acquisitions that distort the market. The undercutting and exploitation of workers in smaller businesses, the use of zero-hours contracts, the creation of false self-employment about which workers have little choice, the unfair treatment of smaller businesses by banks that will fund only those with liquid assets and delays in the payment of invoices by larger firms are all examples of anti-competitive and exploitative practices. In relation to such practices, Governments should find ways of intervening, nationally and internationally, to create a level playing field. Governments should be the partner of business and of the workforce, and they should encourage those wishing to start and to grow a business.

Preventing competition from being undermined matters, so co-operation between competition authorities and the sharing of information between jurisdictions is a key part of preventing anti-competitive practices. There is an existing agreement between the EU and Canada on competition law. It provides for the reciprocal notification of cases under investigation by either party where such cases may affect the important interests of the other party. It provides for co-ordination of enforcement activities and the provision of assistance where both parties have an interest. It provides the ability of one party to request the other to take enforcement action if there is reason to believe that anti-competitive activities carried out on its territory are adversely affecting the other party’s important interests. It also provides for the exchange of information subject to confidentiality provisions and conditions of use, including on current enforcement activities and priorities, economic sectors of common interest, policy changes that either party is considering and other matters of mutual interest relating to the application of competition law.

Labour will seek for us to remain a member of common European agencies that benefit the UK, such as Europol, Eurojust and the Erasmus scheme. To those, we can now add having access to the information shared between the competition authorities in the EU and in Canada and, for that matter, between those in the EU and in other countries.

The emphasis from the Labour Benches is on jobs, the economy and retaining the benefits of the single market and the customs union. Being able to share information about competition, to prevent anti-competitive practices and support fair competition is consistent with maintaining the best possible relationship with the EU and access to our biggest customer as a country—the customer being the EU, which accounts for 44% of our trade.

On Second Reading on 4 July, the Minister told the House, in answer to my question whether the UK could remain part of the Fundamental Rights Agency after Brexit:

“The Government are looking at the UK’s relationship with all EU bodies, including the FRA, as part of the exit negotiations.”

Further to that answer, may I ask her, three months later, whether the Government have a view yet on whether we will remain in these EU bodies and, indeed, which ones we will remain in during transition, and secondly, whether the UK wishes to remain in these bodies after transition?

In answer to my questions about the competition arrangements, the minister told me on 4 July:

“The UK Government will be free to enter into their own arrangements to share information with Canada directly, and the UK and Canada will need to negotiate any such agreement.”

I also asked about international agreements after the UK leaves the EU, and whether this agreement provides a model. She told me:

“The UK will be free to enter into international agreements on competition”

and she told me that the Government “believe that this agreement is a good model.”—[Official Report, 4 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 1074-75.]

Can she tell me what happens after we leave until new arrangements have been agreed? What transitional arrangements do the Government have in mind for sharing information about competition with Canada and other countries? Perhaps, following my comments about Bombardier, she might want to say whether, in her opinion, the sharing of information with the Canadian Competition Bureau might be of help in addressing the problems caused by Boeing’s actions and by the imposition of punitive tariffs and the return to protectionism that we have seen from the United States Government.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It has been said by some that this Bill lacks substance, that this is a perfunctory debate and that it has little significance. I think that could not be further from the truth. For our actions here in the House this evening demonstrate beyond any discernible doubt that up to and until the point that we leave the European Union, we will continue to use our rights and obligations as full members of that institution, demonstrating that in the United Kingdom the European Union will retain the closest of friends, the strongest of allies and the most dependable of partners.

In that spirit, with our desire to do the right thing by our neighbours and echoing the Prime Minister’s comments yesterday when she reaffirmed our commitment to a peaceful, secure and prosperous future for Europe, it is right that we approve the decisions of the European Union Council. Few other single acts could better signal our desire for a peaceful and prosperous Europe than the granting to Serbia and Albania of observer status in the European Union’s Fundamental Rights Agency.
We cannot forget that it was less than 20 years ago that British and other NATO troops were deployed in the Balkans in the midst of an horrific conflict that we hoped we would never see the likes of in Europe again. While I am sure that all in this House would agree that more should and could be done, with the Council of Europe among others, regarding the pursuit of war crimes in Serbia, and on judicial reform, anti-discrimination policies, illegal migration, organised crime and protections of fundamental freedoms, it is surely a mark of the huge progress made in all these areas by the respective countries that the Council of the EU has seen fit to recommend that they be granted observer status as part of their EU candidate status.

Using our rights and obligations to the full until we leave, as we should, it is right that the UK supports Albania in its accession efforts and Serbia in its reform projects. Our giving consent to these—

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about encouraging the enlargement of the EU across the Balkan countries. On that count, does he also support the application of countries such as Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia?

Andrew Bowie: Each application has to be looked at in its own individual context. It is obviously not for me or this House to decide where each state is in terms of its candidate status, but for the Council of the European Union. I know that that is going through at this very moment.

The third and fourth decisions of the EU Council are necessary to implement a co-operation agreement between the European Union and Canada on competition enforcement. Canada is one of the United Kingdom’s oldest and closest partners: we have been allies in conflicts for over a century and we have a shared past, strong family links and shared values. As if to underline that closeness, Canadian and British troops, as well as European and other NATO service personnel, are working closely, side by side, as part of Exercise Joint Warrior along the north coast of Scotland. It is because of this closeness, and our shared history and values, that many in this House and beyond find it so frustrating that it has taken over eight years for the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement to be agreed between the European Union and Canada. Even then, it almost came unstuck due to the complex internal machinations of Wallonian politics—I was going to make a comment about unchecked devolution, but I have thought better of it. I just wonder whether a UK-Canada free trade deal might take a slightly shorter time.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way and for reminding us that as well as the co-operation with Canada, subject to this proposed Act, a much more significant and detailed co-operation agreement was finalised not so long ago. He will be aware that while the Bill has been offered a potential six hours debating time on the Floor of the House, the CETA deal was agreed without a single minute’s debate on the Floor of the House. Does he believe that that allowed the House to properly influence such an important trade deal?

Andrew Bowie: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that was well before my time in this House so I would not feel entirely comfortable commenting on that. This debate is not about CETA.

The decisions taken in the EU Council being approved by us today for agreement by the European Parliament will replace the 1999 competition and co-operation agreement. As the Minister said, the agreement replicates and builds on the provisions in the earlier agreement by allowing the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau to exchange evidence obtained during investigations, including confidential information and personal data. These decisions will further help British businesses thrive internationally, as both Canadian and European business benefit from strong international competition law. On anti-competitive business practices, we must continue to work with Europe and Canada after we leave the European Union. We on the Conservative Benches know that the only way to reliably increase long-term living standards is through trade. Fair competitive trade is, as we know, the catalyst for reducing poverty, spreading prosperity and fostering innovation.

An outward-looking global Britain, as we will be, must continue to fight fair for business practices across the globe to ensure that free trade works for everyone. I hope the European Union recognises that the approval of its agreements is done in good faith, because it benefits citizens and businesses across the United Kingdom, Europe and Canada. In approving these decisions, we not only signal our commitment to the future of a peaceful and prosperous Europe, reaffirming our position as its closest and most dependable friend, but signal our continued desire to promote fair competition, free trade and an ambitious future for ourselves and our partners across the world.

Peter Grant: I am happy to speak in support of the Bill. As I mentioned in my intervention, it seems ironic that something that appears to attract little opposition and not even a great deal of concern across the House could, if necessary, be granted a total of six hours of debate—tonight’s allocation and what we had on Second Reading—on the Floor of the House, yet massively important and much more contentious EU legislation, such as the CETA deal, is guaranteed no time whatever on the Floor of the House. The Government were eventually dragged kicking and screaming into an upstairs Committee room for an hour and a half after the CETA deal had been signed off but before it was finally ratified. That was after months, if not years, of determined efforts by the European Scrutiny Committee, whose scrutiny process was ignored and overridden by the Government on that and on so many other matters. I will come back in a moment to explain why that is so vital, but it seems ironic that something relatively non-contentious requires an Act of Parliament before the Minister can sign it when Ministers from all parties have quite happily signed much more contentious EU documents in the past without any appropriate reference back to this House.

I want first to speak about the applications from Albania and Serbia. We should enthusiastically welcome the movements in those two countries. I am one of a fairly small number in here who can remember the days when Albania was like the North Korea of Europe. Even before the fall of the iron curtain, even when the
Stasi were in charge in East Germany and even when the Ceausescu regime was in charge in Romania, Albania was seen to be the most isolationist place of all. We should welcome the fact that it now wants to move closer to the more modern family of European nations. And look at where Serbia has come from in the past 20 or 25 years; we should enthusiastically welcome the fact that it is now asking to be allowed to co-operate much more closely in the protection of human rights and the eradication of racism and xenophobia. We should encourage the Serbian people and Government to continue on that journey.

6 pm

The co-operation with Canada makes sense. We are two major trading economies, both of which accept that anti-competitive behaviour on a global scale damages everybody except the handful of billionaires who own the anti-competitive companies. It makes sense for Governments, nation states and groups of nation states to work together. A single country of its own these days is often not big enough to take on the big global economic superpowers that are today’s multinationals. We have to work together to make ourselves big enough to be able to stand up to the big bullies of multinational business. We should certainly look for this kind of co-operation with Canada and, similarly, with other major economies in the future.

There are consequences to the way in which this Government and previous Governments have failed to respect Parliament’s role in scrutinising everything Ministers did on our behalf at the European Union. I say it like that deliberately because the job of the European Scrutiny Committee has never been to scrutinise what Europe is doing. It has always been to scrutinise what Ministers are doing in Europe on behalf of the House. From the couple of years in which I was a member of that Committee, it was perfectly clear that Governments in the past have done everything they could to avoid that scrutiny. I am sorry to say that the House often appears to have been supine in its failure to hold Governments to account for that. That, more than anything, has allowed the wildest of all myths to gain currency: the myth that European civil servants are allowed to make laws without any input from this Parliament. It is simply not true.

When this Parliament has been denied the opportunity to comment on European laws, it has not been the European Union that has denied us that opportunity; it has been British Governments, past and present. Had they not done that—had they held themselves properly to account for their actions in Europe and come back to this House saying, “We don’t agree with what the Europeans want to do. What do you, as Parliament, think?”—the public would not have been made to believe that Europe was acting over the top of this Parliament. They would not have been led down the path that we are heading down. We could have avoided that comical—if it was not so tragic—irony.

Serbia and Albania were each in danger of being seen as international pariahs at different times and for different reasons. These two countries are now taking the sometimes difficult, but momentous, steps towards fully rejoining the worldwide family of democratic nations. At some point along that journey, they will meet the United Kingdom heading in the opposite direction. That is a tragedy that should have been avoided had this Parliament and previous Governments done their job properly.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I have spoken during a previous stage of this legislation and am happy to do so again. Before I begin on the Bill, I have to take issue with the shadow Minister’s use of the phrase “Trumpe regime”. This really is the sort of childish politics that we have come to expect from the Opposition. Never mind various shadow Ministers popping along on certain strong leaders’ particular TV channels without seemingly any notice at all—no criticism of that. But describing the democratically elected Government of our biggest ally and friend as a regime is silly, childish politics. The shadow Minister could do better, but he showed why the Labour party is unfit to hold any sort of ministerial office at any time soon.

I take issue with a couple of things that the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said. It is not true that Parliament has not discussed, debated and questioned Ministers on CETA. I declare an interest as a previous vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on TTIP, now the all-party parliamentary group on transatlantic trade. We have had Backbench Business debates in which TTIP has been debated and the CETA deal has been smeared by certain Members as a Trojan horse for American interests, which is a deep insult to our Canadian friends and allies. Ministers have responded to those debates, and of course the issues have been raised time and again in questions. I partly understand his point, but it is not the case that we have not examined and discussed the CETA provisions in depth in this place, both in the Chamber and elsewhere. It is a consequence of its nature that the trade treaty with Canada passes in this form. There is nothing unusual about it. It is part of our constitutional system.

I also take issue with one other thing the hon. Gentleman said, which in my mind was the biggest nonsense I have heard for some time: that the reason the British people voted to leave the EU was that the British Parliament, even in cases of the direct applicability of EU law and an activist European Court of Justice, has not got in the way of things forced on Britain, even sometimes against the wishes of the British Government. It was a bizarre argument. I suppose it is just another example of people failing to accept the democratic will of the people. Seven out of 10 of my constituents voted to leave the EU. They have pretty much been smeared since the referendum campaign for daring to vote a different way from certain establishment types in this place.

Peter Grant: I will not rise to some of the nonsense the hon. Gentleman is speaking. Will he confirm whether he is familiar with the resolution of the House requiring Ministers to get either clearance or an agreement to waive scrutiny from the European Scrutiny Committee, and will he confirm that when the International Trade Secretary—I think it was him, but I cannot be sure—signed CETA, he did so knowing he did not have the Committee’s approval? The resolution does not say it has to be discussed at a Backbench Business debate or by an APPG; it quite clearly says it has to be cleared by the Committee, but it was not at that time—

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We are a little more lax because this is Committee stage, but I kind of forgot the hon. Gentleman was intervening rather than making a speech. I should not have let him go on for quite so long, but I am sure he has made his point now.
Andrew Percy: I wish to forget that the hon. Gentleman was speaking, given, again, the nonsense he was trotting out that in some way this is Parliament’s failure. He clearly does not understand how European decision making has evolved through the various European treaties over the years and how the role of this House in that legislative process has been diminished. He is a member of a party that wants to retain decision making in Brussels, rather than repatriate it to the UK, so it is a little difficult to swallow being lectured about parliamentary democracy by a representative of a party that wishes decision making to remain in Brussels.

I am delighted, as I was at previous stages, to support the Bill. It is important, as we exit the EU, that we continue to be good partners in Europe, and if it is the will of Serbia and Albania to join the EU in the future, it is not for us to get in their way. Regardless of whether we are in favour of leaving or remaining in the EU, we will all wish them well as they embrace the values that we in this country and our allies in Europe hold so dear.

It is important for their own stability that they be allowed to progress unimpeded down the path they have chosen. Also, by actively supporting the Bill, we show what we wish to be after we have left the EU: good partners with Europe. As a proud Brexiteer, therefore, I am more than happy to support a Bill that might well pave the way for the expansion of the EU.

On the provisions as they relate to Canada, the Minister was unable, quite reasonably, to say whether we would wish to participate in these arrangements in the future. That will of course be a matter for our final arrangements with the EU. The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) set out a position, and the Opposition have set out any number of different positions on Brexit, all of which they appear to be capable of maintaining at the same time. That is an interesting approach to such an important issue.

Mr Seely: How many positions do we think the main Opposition party have taken? I have lost count. Is it five, 10, 15? Where have we got to?

Andrew Percy: I only got a C in GCSE maths, so I am afraid I cannot do such advanced sums involving so many numbers at any one time, but it is certainly a lot, and it is certainly the case that the position taken depends on which shadow Ministers—be they impressive or unimpressive—pop up on the television screen.

Let me now deal with the broader relationship with Canada. This whole process—not only through the agreement that we are discussing, but through CETA—has been an important indicator of how we may wish to do business with Canada in the future.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a typically powerful speech. This agreement is a good start, but, as an advocate for opportunities for future trading arrangements with Canada, does he agree that there is potential to be even more ambitious?

Andrew Percy: I absolutely agree. I am delighted to have been asked once again to be the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Canada, as I was previously until I had the unfortunate experience of being a Minister for a year. I was passionate about the deal that was negotiated. As hon. Members will remember from our work on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, I have been a strong advocate in the House for improved trade relations between this country and north America. I should add, despite being a strong advocate for CETA, that CETA is a classic example of the European Union way of negotiating a trade deal that does not necessarily reflect the peculiarities and the particular circumstances of our economy.

I think—and the Canadians have been very positive about this—that although it would be sensible for us to continue to apply CETA during the immediate period after we have left the European Union and to use it as a starting position, we can be far more ambitious. After all, 40% of our merchandise comes into the EU from Canada. We are the biggest recipient of Canadian foreign direct investment in the EU, and we are the biggest foreign direct investor in Canada among EU countries.

It is certainly the case that we can be more ambitious, and aim for more than what has been achieved so far through CETA, although it is a good start and a good base. I welcomed the Prime Minister’s recent visit to Ottawa, where she established a bilateral trade working group with Prime Minister Trudeau and his Government.

That was a good step forward, especially in the eking out by officials of where a deal could lie in the future.

I want to make a case to the Minister that I have made at earlier stages. I hope he will take it on board, given, again, the nonsense he was trotting out by officials of where a deal could lie in the future.

I have little else to say, other than, again, to wish the Bill every success.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): This is a Bill that I think we can all support. It is small and we have consensus but, as other Members have said, it is still a significant measure. I refer, in particular, to the decision to grant Serbia and Albania observer status at the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

One of the EU’s great successes, which I think the House should celebrate, notwithstanding the decision to leave, is its support to progressive movements in many former Soviet bloc countries in eastern Europe. Many of those countries are now full members of the EU, but many others, although now parliamentary democracies, are still seeking to move forward in a range of areas, as the Minister reminded us, such as in combating sexism, racism, homophobia and conservative nationalism in the worst sense of the term. It is important that we reflect on that in this debate.
Only 20 years ago, as the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) mentioned, this country supported Kosovans. We saw ethnic cleansing in that part of Europe, just a few hours away from Heathrow. We thought that ethnic cleansing had been banished, and that it was impossible for that to occur again in Europe after the horrors of the second world war. The instability of the situation threatened the wider region. It has taken Serbia and Albania 20 years to reach the position in which they can be granted EU observer status.

There are still significant challenges. I recently met representatives from Albania at a conference in Rome on slavery and human trafficking, and we were reflecting on the challenges that the country still faces—I am not as familiar with Serbia, but I know that other Members are. All that I wanted to do was stand up in this House and say that the British Parliament thinks about and understands the people who are seeking to bring about progressive change in their counties, sometimes in very difficult circumstances.

There is a question for us, if and when we leave the EU—without getting into the divisiveness of whether or not we should—of how we can continue to support progressive movements that are seeking to tackle some of the problems in Serbia and Albania, and indeed in countries such as Montenegro. The Government will need to consider how to approach that. That sort of consideration can easily be lost in our debates on the EU, but it is of fundamental importance.

Serbia and Albania have made massive advances, but there is still a long way to go. The granting of observer status is another significant step forward. The people in those countries who are seeking to advance the causes of sexual equality, anti-racism and a nationalism that does not remind us of the horrors we have seen before need our support, and they need to know that we are interested, that we care, and that we will support them in their endeavours. The Bill is small, but it is crucial to us all.

Mr Seely: I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and I will happily pick up on a couple of his points. I will speak briefly in support of the Bill, and specifically Serbia and Albania’s admission to observer status in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. That is important for us, but it is extremely important for those two countries, particularly Serbia.

Whether we like it or not—we clearly do not, because we thought that it had ended about 20 years ago—we are in something of a cold war with the Russian Federation, or at least with its leadership. The aggressive cooling of relations was advertised in President Putin’s Munich speech back in 2007, and it could be said that there was a gestation period of some 10 to 15 years before that during which the forces of proto-communism and socialism, hard-line nationalism, and even an aggressive, virulent fascism coalesced around an illiberal hostility to the western world. Whether we like it or not, there is a battle for Serbia’s future and, broadly speaking, there are two models for where the country is going. One is pro-EU and involves democracy, individual rights and hostility to minority oppression. It is not a perfect system—it could be said that a little more adversarial politics would be no bad thing—but those things are critical to a civilised society.

As the hon. Member for Gedling was saying, the other model that the Serbians face is the one that the Russians want: hard-line nationalism; hostility to individual rights; perhaps a celebration of a sort of ‘pan-Slavism’ and aggressive propaganda against NATO, the EU and “gay Europa”, as the Russian official media would have it. The hon. Gentleman mentioned conservative nationalism, but it goes beyond that—it is a virulent form of illiberalism in almost all forms. It is almost proto-fascist, although it gains support from both sides, with avowed fascists and avowed communists having a similar social agenda involving antagonism towards homosexuality and what they perceive as deviance, and a slavish hierarchical acceptance of an order that we would consider stifling and deeply unpleasant.

Examples of the active destabilisation that has sadly been engaged in in the Balkans include the recent attempted coup in Montenegro, which was allegedly carried out by the GRU—Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate—and the handing out of Russian passports to Serbians in the Balkans. The aim of that is to give the Russians the ability to interfere in politics in that part of the world and, in the worst-case scenario, to create the destabilising, small-scale conflicts that have marked Russia’s behaviour in the former Soviet states. There is also economic and political pressure in mainstream Serbia to try to get the country, and powerful individuals within it, to turn away from a broadly pro-western, pro-EU model.

What can we do about that? From my experiences in former Soviet states, the easiest things are probably free trade and free movement—all those things with the word “free” in—as well as support in every conceivable way for civil society, which the EU’s fundamental rights will help to grow. That is the fundamental basis on which democracy will be strengthened on the basis of our alternative—a broadly pro-western, liberal alternative—with a rejection of more aggressive, destabilising nationalism. For those reasons, the Bill is somewhat important to us, but it is extremely important to the Serbians.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): We are still a member of the EU, so it is right that we proceed with the Bill as quickly as possible. We are not talking about leaving the EU on bad terms, so it is right that we spend time considering such cases as good members of the EU. Two of the four procedures that we are considering under the Bill involve giving Serbia and Albania observer status in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. The agency replaced the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. It collects data about fundamental rights and seeks to engage the public and civil society on tackling such issues. That sounds to me very much like the work of the Council of Europe. I have returned this morning from Strasbourg, where the plenary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is still going on. That body needs a lot of reorganisation and work to bring it up to scratch. However, there was mention earlier of what we might do post-Brexit to engage with such agencies, and it occurs to me that there would be an opportunity, if we were so minded, for us to consider how we might bolster an organisation such as the Council of Europe and wrap things up, rather than duplicating effort.

I think that the last time I was in Strasbourg was during the April session, and I opened up my locker yesterday to find my speaking notes from that trip. The Council of
Europe building, which sits next to the Strasbourg European Parliament building, is essentially mothballed. There is a lot of waste and a lot of duplication, and we could work with our European colleagues and partners to ensure that we streamline things and focus on the frontline of protecting people’s fundamental rights. This debate will affect many millions of people.

Albania and Britain have some quite odd but big links. C. B. Fry was offered the monarchy of Albania, which he turned down, giving rise to the reign of the wonderfully named King Zog I. Norman Wisdom is also fêted in Albania; I think he has a statue in Tirana. The reason why I know these two bits of pub quiz trivia and little else about Albania was mentioned by the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant): Albania has been a very closed country for a long time. It is important that we work however we can to open up that country.

I welcome the accession of Serbia and Albania to the agency, but I also want to say a word about the Canadian aspect of the Bill, as we consider competition law ahead of the ratification of the CETA deal. I have been lucky enough to travel around the world over the past few years to places such as Bangladesh, Burma, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Taiwan, and they have all been looking at how they can work with the UK through free trade deals. I am excited about the prospect of having free trade with as many countries as we can. I do not care if the EU is involved in this free trade—we need to widen our European and global trade that we should push this Bill through.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.
Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.
The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.
Bill reported, without amendment.
Third Reading

6.29 pm

Margot James: I beg to move, That the Bill now be read the Third time.

The brief explanation that accompanied the clause stand part debate in Committee covered all the points that need to be made about this short Bill. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed so fully, and I am grateful for their support for the measures. I wish the Bill an equally swift passage through the other place and on to Royal Assent.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. With your permission, I would like to pay tribute to a loyal servant of this House, Trevor Ford, who has been a Doorkeeper for more than 20 years and is retiring today. He is from my region; he was actually born in Gateshead, but is a proud red and white Sunderland supporter all the same. He served with great distinction in the Royal Air Force from 1969 to 1992 and completed tours in both Northern Ireland, during the 1970s, and West Germany. In 1996, he became a Doorkeeper here in the House of Commons. Many of us will know that Trevor has worked at almost every post in and around the Chamber; he has worked in the Members’ Lobby, at the back of the Speaker’s Chair, in the Strangers Gallery and, more recently, in the Special Gallery. He has been the Bar Doorkeeper and has led the Speaker’s Procession on many occasions. He is a thoroughly well liked, thoroughly decent individual, and he has served this House with great distinction for 21 years. On behalf of the whole House, I would like to thank him for his loyal service and wish him well on his retirement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): On a technical matter, I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for raising that point of order. It was, of course, not a point of order for the Chair, but I am delighted that he took the opportunity to draw to the attention of the House the fact that this is Trevor Ford’s last day in his current office. On behalf of everyone in the whole House, I would like to add our very grateful thanks to Trevor Ford, who has carried out his duties with great dignity over many, many years. All of us who are elected to this House know very well, every minute of every day, that we could not do our duties if we did not have the support and absolute loyalty of the other servants of the House, who carry out their duties so well. We appreciate that what Trevor Ford has done over many years often goes without notice, but we notice all the hard work and all the dedication. I am absolutely delighted that the House has this momentary opportunity to pay tribute to Trevor’s many, many years of service. I should just say for the record that while I have been saying this he has managed to stand to attention the whole time—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] It is unusual that we can manage to pay a tribute such as this, but let me give our very sincere thanks from the whole House. We wish Trevor all the very best for the future.
Baby Loss Awareness Week

6.33 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Before I start the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, let me say that I am delighted that you were able to pay tribute to all of our Doorkeepers and, in particular, to Trevor, on his last day here.

I beg to move,

That this House has considered Baby Loss Awareness Week.

I am personally very pleased that this debate is being held in Government time, having participated in last year’s debate on baby loss. It was one of the most moving experiences I have had in this Chamber, as Members from both sides of the House gave expression to their own experiences. That helps to send a signal outside this place of the significance that we accord this, not just within the Department of Health and the NHS; Members of this House sympathise with the many members of the public who go through such experiences. It does this House a good service when Members who feel able to do so place on the record their own experiences. It is right and important that we continue to raise awareness of the devastating impact of baby loss.

I wish to restate at the outset this Government’s commitment to providing high-quality bereavement care and to reduce the numbers of babies who are lost too soon through miscarriage, stillbirth or other causes such as sudden infant death syndrome. I pay tribute to members of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, which they co-chair, for achieving so much in particular, I thank my hon. Friends the Members of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss for their work.

I wish to update the House on some of the initiatives that the Government and the NHS have put in place since last year’s debate to improve safety, reduce stillbirths and other adverse maternity outcomes and improve bereavement care. I believe that all hon. Members support the ambition of the Secretary of State to halve the rates of stillbirth, neonatal and maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or soon after birth by 2030, and to achieve a 20% reduction in rates by 2020.

Shortly after the debate last October, the Secretary of State launched the safer maternity care action plan, which set out additional support for the maternity and neonatal services working to achieve that ambition. The plan set out a range of initiatives on five themes. First, there is a focus on leadership, with the establishment of local, regional and national maternity safety champions to promote professional cultures, teamwork and continuous improvement. Every trust with maternity services has pledged to appoint a maternity safety champion, and 88 out of the 134 trusts that provide maternity services now have named leads.

Secondly, there is a focus on learning and best practice. This includes the Saving Babies’ Lives care bundle to reduce stillbirths, which was launched by NHS England in March 2016. Saving Babies’ Lives brings together four elements of care that are recognised as evidence-based and/or best practice: reducing smoking in pregnancy; risk assessment and surveillance for foetal growth restriction; raising awareness of reduced foetal movement; and effective foetal monitoring during labour. The Department has also funded Sands and Best Beginnings to develop and promote the “Our Chance” campaign to give parents knowledge and confidence to maximise their chances of healthy outcomes.

Thirdly, there has been a focus on multi-disciplinary teams with an £8.1 million maternity safety training fund, which is designed to ensure that staff have the skills and confidence they need to deliver world-leading safe care. All 134 trusts with maternity units have now received funding and are implementing training packages. Many of those are being delivered by the charity Baby Lifeline, which I met this morning to learn some of the benefits that this training is bringing to improving safety, reducing error, and helping patient outcomes.

I visited Leeds teaching hospital a couple of weeks ago and heard from midwives about their multi-disciplinary training programme “Deliver me safely” in which they and doctors undergo training together in the recognition that human factors can contribute to harm in maternity systems. These simulations focus on situational awareness and team interactions, challenging some cultural hierarchic attitudes, which I am afraid can be prevalent in parts of the NHS, and encouraging everybody to speak up if they have safety concerns.

Lastly, there has been a focus on innovation, with the launch of a maternity safety innovation fund of £250,000, which has supported 25 local maternity services to create and pilot new ideas, and of the national maternal and neonatal health safety collaborative to build local capability in quality improvement and to provide structured support for local teams. One example of this is the safer films project at the University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust, which is developing staff training films, using headcam devices to show interactions with clinicians from the mother’s perspective. The patient’s view of the drills undertaken around her allows clinicians to look back at the impact that their activity, including how they communicate with women and their partners, has on the patient.

Just last month, the Secretary of State hosted a roundtable with 25 key partners across the health system to discuss evidence and current NHS clinical practice on supporting women to have safe births. There has been an enthusiastic response to the Secretary of State’s ambition, with a range of initiatives developed by national and local NHS organisations, royal colleges and charities. We will continue to work with our partners to align these initiatives with the work of the maternity safety action plan. I am happy to report that we are on track to achieve our 2020 ambition. The stillbirth rate in England has fallen from 5.1 per 1,000 births in 2010 to 4.4 in 2015. The neonatal mortality rate was 2.6 deaths per 1,000 births in 2015, down 10% from 2.9 in 2010.

I would like to touch briefly on the importance of learning from when things go wrong in clinical care. Many parents I have spoken to have made it clear they want maternity and neonatal services to learn from the deaths of their babies so that other families do not have to go through the experience of losing a much-loved and wanted child if that can be prevented. Recent publications from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and MBRRACE-UK—Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries across the UK—found that some local reviews of stillbirths and neonatal deaths were of poor quality.
Input from parents or independent experts is not routinely sought, and there is insufficient information to understand the quality of care provided.

To improve the quality of those reviews and to learn from them, the Department of Health, together with the Health Departments in Scotland and Wales, has funded the development of a national standardised perinatal mortality review tool to support systematic, multidisciplinary reviews of the circumstances and care leading up to every stillbirth and neonatal death. The tool, which will be available at the end of this year, will also support clinicians to talk with parents about the care review and how they can contribute to the process.

Last month, I laid the draft health service safety investigations Bill in Parliament. This Bill will take forward the work of the current independent healthcare safety investigation branch, which came into operation last April. Under the proposals, HSIB will have far-reaching access so that it can investigate serious safety incidents or risks to patient safety; help to develop national standards on investigations; and provide guidance and training to improve investigative practice across the health service.

Earlier this year, we also consulted on proposals to introduce a system of consistent and independent investigations for all instances of severe avoidable birth injury, along with access to ongoing support and compensation for eligible babies through an administrative scheme. The public consultation into a rapid resolution and redress scheme for severe avoidable birth injury concluded at the end of May, receiving more than 200 responses. We are currently in the process of listening to people’s views, and we aim to publish a formal response soon.

Turning to bereavement care, a clear message that we heard last year, particularly from my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury and for Colchester and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who I am pleased to see with us this evening, was about the need for a bereavement care pathway to ensure that all families experiencing baby loss receive the highest quality of care, no matter where they live.

Since last year’s debate, the Department has funded Sands to deliver a national bereavement care pathway. I am delighted that 11 wave 1 pilot sites were announced yesterday. I know from the experience of my friends and colleagues that care in bereavement is best described as patchy. In some cases, I could use a less flattering adjective. There is no doubt that we need to do more to raise the training of staff and the facilities available to look after families who go through a bereavement in a hospital setting, and indeed to provide care and support to those who suffer loss outside a hospital setting. That is an important initiative.

Earlier this year, Sands, NHS England and the London maternity clinical network published a new maternity bereavement experience measure. That tool aims sensitively to enable parents whose baby has died to feed back about the care they received. It also aims to support services to learn from the experiences of bereaved parents and identify where local improvements may be needed.

Sands is also working on a project for NHS England on the role of the bereavement midwife. The project will make recommendations for the remit of the role of the bereavement midwife and give guidance on the support structures required around the role.

Since 2010, the Government have invested £35 million in the NHS to improve birthing environments, including better bereavement rooms and quiet spaces at nearly 40 hospitals to support bereaved families. Whenever I visit maternity units, I ask to see the bereavement suite. I am always impressed by the quality of the suites, by the feedback from families and staff alike and by how the commitment of many families who have gone through such terrible loss has often led to them raising funds to help to create better bereavement facilities in hospitals.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I commend the Minister for his excellent speech. I am sure that he will join me in congratulating Forever Stars, which is exactly the sort of charity that he has described. It was started by two of my constituents, who sadly lost their baby, Emily, who was stillborn. They have raised about £200,000 for two suites. A third is on the way, and they are now fundraising for counselling services for the siblings of babies who have not survived.

Mr Dunne: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and thank her for drawing that to the House’s attention. That is one of the most significant examples of fundraising for such suites that I have come across. I pay tribute to the family involved and to the efforts to raise funds for the counselling of siblings, who go through a traumatic experience as well.

I conclude by reiterating that the Government are fully committed to reducing the number of babies who die during pregnancy or in the neonatal period, and to providing support for bereaved families.

6.47 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in what is now the annual debate on Baby Loss Awareness Week, although, sadly, the only reason why such a debate and such a week of remembrance are necessary is to mark the 3,500 babies stillborn each year across the UK, with one in three of those stillbirths occurring at full-term. That of course does not take into account the babies who die within a year of birth.

All the experts, including Professor Jim Thornton, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the University of Nottingham, agree that “For an otherwise healthy baby to die undelivered near term is, with hindsight, an easily avoidable event. Research to make it avoidable in practice is a priority.”

That is why debates such as this, and any and all measures to highlight stillbirth, are vital.

Although the UK’s stillbirth rate has fallen slightly in recent years, it remains unacceptably and stubbornly high. For too long, this taboo was left in the shadows, too difficult, too upsetting to talk about. As politicians, we all know, what is not discussed, what is not acknowledged, is not addressed and, if not addressed, it cannot be improved. We in this House have been and will continue to work to break that deafening silence. That is our duty on behalf of all those trapped in the isolating silence of grief. Some of us in the Chamber today have experienced that silence first hand.
I think back to 9 June 2016, when I had a Westminster Hall debate on stillbirth, which was hugely emotional, not just because of my own experience but because of the realisation that so many of our babies have been lost over generations, with parents isolated in grief, as this was something that was never talked about in our society, except in whispers. However, since 2016 we have come quite a way. The all-party group on baby loss has done so much to ensure that the issue stays firmly on the agenda. Gradually, as a society, we are becoming more willing to acknowledge this awful event, which affects 3,500-plus babies every year in the United Kingdom, with all the devastation, grief and fallout that it inevitably brings.

Since 2016, I have been in contact with a number of stillbirth organisations such as Sands and Safer Births UK—in fact, too many to mention. Early on, I became convinced that if we accept the analysis of the experts, such as Professor Jim Thornton and others, that for an otherwise healthy baby to die undelivered near-term is, with hindsight, an easily avoidable event—why would we not accept what the experts tell us?—then surely it makes sense to have full investigations when otherwise healthy babies do die undelivered near-term. One third of babies across the UK who are stillborn die at the end of the pregnancy. One in three—this is something that requires serious attention.

That is why last year I asked both the Secretary of State for Health in the United Kingdom Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Health in Scotland, Shona Robison MSP, to instigate coroner inquests in England and fatal accident inquiries in Scotland when stillbirths at full term occurred in an otherwise healthy baby. I appreciate that such processes are expensive, complicated and difficult, but if we consider the lessons that could be learned—what has been missed, what was overlooked and what could have prevented the loss of a baby so close to birth—that can inform good practice and improve the care for future babies. Logically, the need for inquests or fatal accident inquiries would surely diminish gradually over time, as fewer babies would be lost. Of course, we would not just be preventing the loss of babies late in pregnancy either; the lessons learned would inform practice and improve it across the whole maternity service at any and every stage of pregnancy.

When I lobbied for that, I was told by some that it was simply not doable—that I should spend my efforts improving practice in other areas of maternity care: surely it would be best to focus on, for example, ensuring minimum and consistent standards of care across the board. Well, yes and no. The minimum and consistent standards of care that everybody in this Parliament seeks should be embedded in improvement and research, and the use of coroner inquiries and fatal accident inquiries could be a hugely important part of that. It is not an either/or question.

I am hugely heartened by the fact that, after an initial refusal, the Cabinet Secretary for Health in Scotland, Shona Robison MSP, has agreed that the Crown Office in Scotland should investigate whether there could be fatal accident inquiries for babies lost late in pregnancy. Such a move is not about bringing prosecutions but about learning lessons, informing practice and making sure that when our children are about to be born but something goes wrong, we find out why and use that knowledge to make other babies safer.

Make no mistake: this is a monumentally significant step forward, which has largely been ignored by the mainstream media. I do not know why, but it means that so many who would be comforted by it may not even know that it has happened. However, the significance of this development cannot be overstated. If, after consideration, the Crown Office in Scotland decides for whatever reason that this measure cannot be implemented, at least we will know where we are. We will know what obstacles we are dealing with and can set about removing them. I am also convinced that this measure will mean that fewer of our babies die. When that is shown to be the case, I am hugely optimistic that a similar measure will be adopted in England. That, I feel, has been a huge step forward in the 16 months since my first debate on stillbirth. Credit must also go to the campaigners who have worked hard to achieve this.

This coming Sunday, 15 October, is Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day and also would have been my wee boy’s eighth birthday. It is very important that his death, and the deaths of all the babies who have been lost, should not have been in vain. The campaign goes on, so that other babies do not have their lives ended before they even begin.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent and emotive speech, and she is conveying an important message about inquiries. Does she agree that it is also extremely important that early miscarriage is well researched? I know from my own experience of early miscarriage that when it happens, people say, “It’s just natural, and there is nothing that can be done.” But the more we look into it and research the causes, the more we can prevent that grief.

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. If we start our research at the end of pregnancy and work back the way, I think we will be able to spot things much earlier in pregnancy as we learn the lessons that were missed at the end.

No parent should have to bury their child without knowing or understanding why they did not live. That is what drives me on, and I know it drives on many of us who are taking part in this debate. The tragedy of the loss of so many of our babies is that it does not have to be this way. To change that must be, in the words of Professor Jim Thornton, our “priority”.

6.56 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the Leader of the House for going above and beyond to secure this important debate this week, as part of Baby Loss Awareness Week. It is particularly important that the debate should be held this week.

I did not come into politics to be a baby loss campaigner. Like several of my all-party group colleagues, tragic circumstances led me to campaign to bring about change on this issue. Those circumstances occurred three years ago this Thursday, which makes this week all the more poignant. We, as politicians, have the best job in the world, and I would challenge anyone who says that Back Benchers cannot get things done. Politicians do not always have the best reputations—some of that is deserved, and some less so—but I would refer any sceptics to the work of the all-party group on baby loss.
[Will Quince]

This place is amazing, and if we use it correctly on a cross-party basis we can achieve great things. We can get things done. We can bring about positive change that will make a difference and affect people’s lives. The all-party group was established, and exists, to reduce miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death, and to ensure that we have world-class bereavement care and support for those who suffer the tragedy of losing a child.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and those who will follow for their contributions in the Chamber. The hon. Gentleman is, like me, a person of faith. We are talking about losing small children or miscarrying; my mother miscarried a number of times, my sister miscarried and the young girl who works in my office miscarried on two occasions, and what sustained all of them was their faith. Does he agree that at such times, when people are in difficult circumstances, it is important that they have someone from a faith or religious background to call on? Does he also agree that it is important that hospitals have rooms where bereaved parents can spend time together, reflect and call on someone greater than us?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman makes some very good points, and he is absolutely right that bereavement suites play a very important role, as do hospital chaplains. I say that as a man of faith, but I know lots of people who have been through this tragic experience and who are not of faith. Nevertheless, the hospital chaplain came to talk to them—not about God, and not about religion—and sat there, listened, and allowed them to come to terms with the tragic event that had just happened. The chaplain gave them the time that they needed, and which medical professionals do not always have. It is a really important role, and chaplains are a credit to the NHS.

We now have some ambitious targets when it comes to tackling stillbirth and neonatal death. I applaud the Government for their commitment to bringing about a reduction in stillbirth and neonatal death of 20% by 2020—I recognise the Minister’s efforts to make us aware of the steps that will be taken to achieve that—and 50% by 2030. Those targets are very much to be welcomed. Even if we are to achieve those targets—and let us be clear: it would be absolutely fantastic if we could achieve a 50% reduction in stillbirth and neonatal death by 2030—that statistic would still mean thousands of babies dying every year. Tens of thousands of parents—

7 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 15).

That, at this day’s sitting, proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Baby Loss Awareness Week may be proceeded with, though opposed, until 9.00 pm.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

Question agreed to.

Debate resumed.

Main Question again proposed.
through this most traumatic of experiences can often lead to mental health issues—such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, about which there is growing evidence—whether they appear weeks, months or sometimes even years later. The number of couples that separate after losing a child is still very high, and that comes with huge social costs. Putting in place the right level of high-quality, consistent bereavement care is not just the right thing to do for parents; it should be part of our push to improve mental health care nationwide.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): On the pathway for bereaved parents, may I raise a particular type of bereavement that is unusual but does, unfortunately, happen? On 4 August, my constituent Craig Renton went into hospital with his wife Heidi for her to have a caesarean. Sadly, she died during the caesarean, and although their baby was born, she also died 15 hours later. Within the space of 15 hours, the happy couple expecting the birth of their daughter were no more, and my constituent Craig, who came to see me, had lost both his wife and his first and only child. In such a situation, the bereavement care needs to be designed particularly carefully if it is to deal with two bereavements in one day.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend raises a most tragic case, and I know I speak for everybody in the House when we send our condolences to Craig in what must have been a hugely emotional and traumatic experience. My hon. Friend is absolutely right when he says that the point of the national bereavement care pathway is to ensure that care, although consistent, is individualised and patient-centred. That means that when there are unique sets of circumstances—I would say that was a unique set of circumstances—the care package and the bereavement support are unique to match them.

I could never, ever truly express my thanks to the nurses at the Rosemary suite, a specialist bereavement suite at Colchester General Hospital, for the care and support that my wife and I received just three years ago, but I want to ensure that every grieving parent receives the excellent, high-level support that we did. I truly believe that the new national bereavement care pathway is an important step to making that a reality. I am really proud to co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss and I know that the work that we are doing on a cross-party basis is really important and is changing lives up and down the country.

Finally, I want to send a message to bereaved parents up and down the country that together we will break the silence on baby loss.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I want to make sure we all get equal time on this. Can I suggest that Members speak for up to eight minutes, so that everybody gets equal time? It is a very important day, it is a very emotional debate, and I want to make sure we get fairness right across the Chamber.

7.7 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I speak as someone who has not lost a child, but I remember what happened when I was working in Lebanon and was four months pregnant with my son. We had discussed the risks of going to Lebanon when I was pregnant and we thought I would only be there a few months; even if I was here there would be nothing that could be done, so I was not adding to the risk. But when I suddenly saw blood, all of a sudden I realised how paltry that word “miscarriage” is. I understand that we are predominantly talking about babies who have been lost later, but that term “miscarriage” sounds like “misstep”—like a bump in the road—and by four or five months, particularly once you have had that little ultrasound picture, which you thought was going to be the first of a whole lifetime of photographs, you realise you have already bonded with the bulge that means you need elasticated waistbands and is giving you heartburn or keeping you up at night, or even, a bit later, starting to kick the living daylights out of you at three in the morning. So I think it is really important, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) said, that we think of those who are slightly outwith this debate. That is something that we must try to bring over to medical staff as well.

I acknowledge the discussion about bereavement midwives, and we always need champions and leaders when, trying to raise awareness, but as someone who has worked in breast cancer for over 30 years, I can tell the House that having a grumpy old surgeon like me sending the lady to the breast cancer nurse, who would be nice to her, is not a solution. In fact, with all midwives, all doctors, it only takes one person to turn the knife and make that heartbreak worse.

I had a friend who had three miscarriages before she successfully had two rather wild and lively boys—something for which I am sure she gives thanks every day. On her second miscarriage, a routine scan at 16 weeks revealed that the heartbeat had stopped. They thought she would miscarry, but she did not. The period between then and when she underwent surgery meant she knew she was carrying her own dead baby. That was really difficult. At the scan that made the diagnosis, she was simply sent back out to the waiting room after a couple of minutes. She was sitting there surrounded by women with their bumps discussing their plans, while she waited for almost half an hour to be taken into a room and just given leaflets. There is no point in having one person who knows how someone should be supported: every single member of every single team, from antenatal, perinatal and right through to early paediatrics, needs to know the language, the body language, the timing and the support that someone might need.

The number one thing as a doctor is to try to reduce the number of deaths. Scotland actually had higher perinatal, stillbirth and neonatal figures. About five years ago, there was a big discussion in the profession in Scotland saying that it needed to be tackled. It was not enough simply to collect data—whether the Scottish perinatal mortality data, which go back to 1977, or, now, in MBRRACE-UK. The cases had to be looked at. Regardless of whether that is done through a fatal accident inquiry, it must be done by the clinicians. As surgeons, we carry out morbidity-mortality meetings every couple of weeks to discuss cases that have gone wrong in a very open and frank way. We learn from them. Often, we will suddenly see a pattern that makes us want to change. Since 2013 in Scotland, our perinatal figures have dropped by 34%—a third—our stillbirth rate has dropped by 26% and neonatal has dropped by over 50%. That is what can be done if every single case is discussed.
Believe me, Scottish Members here know that the geography of Scotland makes providing perinatal care really difficult and challenging. It is easy to identify the difficult case with a past history of diabetes or a huge wain and a small pelvis, but any delivery can go wrong. One challenge we face, which is not faced in so many areas in England, is how to get people off our islands and how to cover hundreds of miles, yet we have managed to bring the figures down.

It is absolutely right that, even if we drop the mortality rate further, there will be children who are lost. We must not stop trying to do that and we must support people, in particular those whose babies are born and require extra neonatal care in a special baby unit. We know they have a higher incidence of post-natal depression. We know that, naturally, mothers who lose a child will have an increased incidence of post-natal depression. If we can get all our teams to try to get it right all the way through and support them, then maybe we can tackle both problems.

7.13 pm  
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker, although I have to say it is not a pleasure to speak in today’s debate. It is absolute torture for many of the speakers who have chosen to share their experiences with the House. It is, however, a pleasure to follow the extremely knowledgeable speech, as ever, of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). It is so good to hear the good news from Scotland about the real developments that have come from investigation into what happens when things go wrong.

I am most grateful to business managers—even if I am quite close to some of them—for allocating time during Baby Loss Awareness Week, and to all those who organised the extension of today’s sitting. It is a testament to the way the House has changed. I am grateful that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, have chosen to be in the Chair after your traumatic experiences last year listening to us. We are most grateful to all those who have enabled this debate.

It is fair to say that maternal safety keeps me awake at night. Issues with the maternity unit at Horton General Hospital in my constituency sadly continue. It is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) in his place. I do not know what keeps him awake at night. Indeed, I do not know whether he is kept awake at night. If he is, I suspect his young son probably has something to do with it, but I also know that he worries as much as I do about the future of the unit. The uncertainty goes on. My hon. Friend, other campaigners and I are not giving in. I remain convinced that the current situation is unsafe. Significant numbers of transfers are taking place during labour. Babies have been born at the side of the road and in ambulances. Mothers and their babies are not getting the sort of care that is safe, kind and close to home, which is what everybody in the Chamber wills them to get.

Out of this morass sadly comes some dreadful casework. I have noticed that when something goes wrong, the shutters come down in the health service. Hospitals are on the defensive from the beginning and legal teams are called in. In one of the saddest cases I have had to deal with over the past year, Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust responded by saying that it would not meet me or the family in question without legal representation. My attempts to ensure that there was a full and external review of the case by MBRACE-UK, for example, were stalled for months. This is simply not acceptable. Families, along with most of us, are motivated by a burning desire to ensure that what happened to us will not happen again. They are not interested in compensation except where that is necessary for looking after a desperately sick child. They are motivated by change in practice.

Sir Charles Pollard, the former chief constable of Thames Valley police, has been working tirelessly on producing restorative solutions in the justice sector—that is my background—and increasingly in the health sector, where the needs of all parties, including families, doctors and staff, are crucial. Constructive conversations can be had in carefully controlled environments. I think, particularly after having a lengthy conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), that it is important to find a new language. We do not want to apportion blame to anyone in any way, unlike in the justice sector. Finding a new language would be good for families and for staff, who are often traumatised by a loss on their watch.
care on offer, but I am encouraged by the constructive conversations I have had with it on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss recently and am hopeful that we will have real progress to report this time next year.

I would like to end on a high. Petals opened its new bereavement counselling centre in Banbury yesterday, in the Horton General Hospital, and I was very pleased to be there. It offers bereaved families six sessions per couple. That might not be enough, and it certainly might not be appropriate for mothers and fathers to be seen together, but the evidence shows that what it does is of very real value and that its outcomes are valuable and beneficial to the couples who use its service. Lots of charities do similar work, as is clear from our well-attended APPG meetings.

We might not enjoy these debates, but they have begun to change both perceptions and the law, and I am grateful to the Minister and the previous Member for Ipswich for all their work. I would like to finish by congratulating us all.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate, which allows us to play our part in Baby Loss Awareness Week.

In terms of how we talk about it day to day, pregnancy and childbirth are for many people times of joy and celebration: a new addition to the family, a celebration of new life, the hopes and dreams—and laughter and tears—that a new baby can bring to a family. It is all the more difficult, therefore, when a family suffers the loss of a baby. These issues—miscarriage, stillbirth, death in infancy—are less commonly spoken about for a range of reasons. I note that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) referenced miscarriage. I know from speaking to family and friends that the loss is felt acutely, but too often, perhaps, society trivialises it. To the mother and family, it is the loss of a baby—an unborn baby—and the hopes and dreams that go with it. When that is taken away, privately it can be very difficult. Some do not tell their family and friends straightway, so the grief takes place in a very private and unspoken way. Others break the news, and it is heart-breaking to have to do shortly after sharing the good news of the pregnancy. I know that that can be heart-breaking to have to do so shortly after sharing the good news of the pregnancy.

I would like to raise a number of short points. First, our perinatal and support services must improve, not just following baby loss or miscarriage, but in relation to women’s mental health. The way in which we understand the human mind, mental health and trauma has changed and advanced year on year, but I think that, for too many of the people who go through this experience, those services are not advancing at the same pace and they need to catch up.

Secondly, we need to look at statutory and support services for bereaved parents as a matter of urgency. Like many people, before I started to speak to parents, I had assumed that these issues would be dealt with compassionately by employers, schools and statutory agencies, but it became clear that that was not always the case. There is a good basis for the introduction of enhanced statutory protections for bereaved families, to ensure that they are given the time that they need to try to heal and move forward with their lives.

Thirdly, I think it would be remiss of us not to refer to the health of mothers, infant mortality and miscarriage rates all over the world. There is no doubt that improvements can be made, and that they can be made throughout the United Kingdom as well. I welcome the commitment that has been made in that regard, but in too many countries, there are still appalling rates of infant mortality and appalling statistics about the health of mothers and what happens during childbirth. I know that most of those who campaign on the issue here will have the same interest in trying to improve services for women throughout the world. Those in the poorest areas often suffer incredibly during childbirth, and there are still very high levels of infant and mother mortality in such places.

Lastly, I want to take a moment to recognise all the parents and families who have suffered loss in this way. I think that it will be an incredible tribute to those families, and to the loss that they have suffered, if we go on striving to create world-leading services in both bereavement and childcare.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I feel extremely humbled to be able to speak in the debate. Let me start by paying tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), as well as all members of the all-party group. They have shown a much-needed light on the issue of baby loss, its effect on parents, and the need for action. They have not only pushed for change, but helped to achieve it. On behalf of everyone who has ever suffered, I take this opportunity to say thank you.

We must also pay tribute to the medical professionals who work day in, day out to prevent baby loss and deal with it, and to organisations such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists—as well as charities such as Sands. They play an important role in developing programmes and reviewing the care provided for expectant and bereaved parents.
It is estimated that today about 15 babies in the UK will die before, during or shortly after birth. Today let us not only remember those who have suffered and the babies they have lost, but pledge to work together, across parties, to support the Government’s work and ensure that nobody faces a postcode lottery when it comes to baby loss. We need to determine what should be the level of bereavement support and ensure that it is consistent across the country so that parents receive what they deserve if they tragically lose a child.
coroners’ jurisdiction so that they are able, at the request of parents, to investigate a stillbirth? Hospitals’ internal review processes should involve parents and should answer their questions about why their baby has died, but when those questions are not answered, the coroner can play a vital role not just in providing answers—important though that is—but in identifying preventable deaths, and ensuring that lessons are learned and mistakes are not repeated. Such a change to coronial law would bring England and Wales in line with Northern Ireland, where a landmark legal ruling in 2013 held that a coroner “can carry out an inquest into the death of a stillborn child that had been capable of being born alive.”

It is clear from several contributions this evening that there is cross-party support for such a change. I particularly welcomed the contribution of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). She is not in the Chamber now, but she assured me that the change has her support, for which I am thankful. I hope that the Minister will deal specifically and positively with this suggestion when he responds to the debate.

There is nothing that I can do to take away the pain of Harriet’s death for Jack and Sarah, as much as I wish I could, but I think that they would gain some comfort if their experience helped to prevent other parents from suffering in the same way.

7.37 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). I know exactly how Jack and Sarah feel, because it was the burning desire to see change that motivated me and many others in the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss to work not only to reduce the number of neonatal deaths and stillbirths, but to consider how we can improve things for parents.

When we set up the APPG, saying that we wanted to achieve huge cuts in the number of families affected by all these issues and to put in place a bereavement care pathway seemed to be setting rather a large challenge. I pay tremendous tribute not only to Members of this House—it has been a cross-party effort—but to parents and health professionals, who have risen to the challenge set by the APPG and the Department of Health. In a way, I can provide some comfort to a number of Members who have spoken today about miscarriage, for example, because the national bereavement care pathway, which was launched yesterday, in effect addresses loss from conception to up to one year post-birth. That is quite groundbreaking in a number of ways. Pilot schemes in 11 hospital trusts are developing specific pathways to address early miscarriage, late miscarriage and stillbirth, and for those in the very unfortunate situation of having to terminate because of foetal abnormality, I have been encouraged by the willingness of parents to come forward and talk about their experiences as part of the development of these pathways and to share their loss with medical professionals, including the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the Royal College of Midwives. There has absolutely been cross-working and buy-in for this change.

I am encouraged that the change is being supported by the Department of Health. Pilots are taking place so that lessons can be learned, with the outcome of those lessons applied before things are rolled out more widely and nationally. As somebody who sat in a room with white walls and a sofa that was not anything like a bereavement suite, I know at first hand, as do so many parents who have not been in such facilities, that when one visits a hospital such as Medway Maritime Hospital, which has the most extraordinary facilities, one can see that change is coming. The improvement and change in the past year has, to my mind, been something that I and many professionals did not imagine would happen as quickly as it has and in the way that it has.

I would absolutely support the hon. Member for Nottingham South if she proposed a ten-minute rule Bill to try to effect the change in coronial law that she spoke about. I myself will introduce a ten-minute rule Bill tomorrow on the regulation of foetal dopplers. I will expand on that point tomorrow, but the false reassurance they provide to parents can increase the risk of stillbirth. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) put forward a Bill in the last Parliament that has now been taken up by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), and it is due to have its Second Reading on 20 October. There are therefore methods to effect change in this Parliament, and I know that the hon. Member for Nottingham South would find great support in the House for her constituents if she tried to effect the change that they propose. I know that I will be trying to get the Minister’s support tomorrow on the subject of foetal dopplers.

This is Parliament at its best. We are listening to constituents. We understand where there has been a failure in the system, and there is no doubt that the statistics show we need to make changes in this area. I am delighted that the Government have accepted that quickly and have therefore set ambitious targets. The chief executive of my local hospital, the Leighton Hospital, which has an award-winning maternity unit, was able to say to me that they had had 14 fewer deaths this year. That means 14 fewer families in my local areas going through the loss that so many in this House and outside it have seen. At the same time, I should say that the Countess of Chester Hospital is under investigation in relation to 15 baby deaths. There are concerns about care in relation to eight of them. So the perinatal mortality tool is crucial, as is the investigation of these incidents, in order that those lessons are learned, that good practice is shared and that professionals are honest with parents where something has gone wrong: they need to admit that and learn from it so that it does not affect other families. Let us get that open culture; the Health Secretary has talked openly about the need for no-fault investigation, and the need to learn from that culture is incredibly important. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who speaks for the Opposition on this matter, will know of the particular importance of that, because the Countess of Chester serves his area too and this directly affects all our constituents.

I say to the Minister that the huge progress that has been made is encouraging. The charities and colleges yesterday spoke about the great enthusiasm and drive that has come from working collaboratively together. If we can take that and use it, the progress we are starting to make can carry on. We can roll it out into other areas. We know that they exist, so let me mention just two. First, we know that there are big issues in respect of minority ethnic groups that go beyond the

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hospital setting, often relating to factors in the environment. Those issues fall outside the Department of Health’s remit, but wider working will need to be done to examine how those factors can be addressed and whether or not public health issues arise in their regard.

The second area involves general practitioners. I sent out a freedom of information request to every clinical commissioning group in England, and less than 50% of them provide any form of bereavement counselling, whatever the death. So even not in relation to child loss, a lot of CCGs simply are not commissioning support in the community. Those CCGs have relied on provision from the acute sector, and the next piece of work from the community. Those CCGs should be encouraged to join that sector in funding bereavement counselling, such as that provided by Petals, in the future?

Victoria Prentis: The other sector that provides so much of the bereavement care, such as the service I helped open yesterday, is of course the charitable sector. Would my hon. Friend like to comment on whether CCGs should be encouraged to join that sector in funding bereavement counselling, such as that provided by Petals, in the future?

Antoinette Sandbach: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and she can probably guess that the reason for my freedom of information request was to put pressure on not only my local services, but services more widely. There is expertise out there that we can build on, but bereavement touches everybody and this Government’s focus on mental health gives us a real opportunity to approach death in a way that minimises its mental health impacts, which can be severe. We can roll out elsewhere the way in which the Department of Health is leading on baby loss and working together with the third sector. This year’s Baby Loss Awareness Week therefore perhaps has a message of hope that has not been present in the past two such debates we have had.

7.49 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am very grateful to be called to speak in this debate. I took part in the debate last year and was very moved by the contributions. I am pleased that we have such excellent speakers again today. I wish to pay tribute to the all-party group for the wonderful work that it has done, and to say to the Government that their record of making improvements and investing in this area is to be applauded.

I am having to stand here again because I wish to speak about my constituents, Mike and Tina Trowhill. Members may remember that I spoke about them last year. Many years ago, they lost their little boy, William, who was then cremated. They were told that there were no ashes, but 20 years later they found that there had been ashes and that they had been scattered without the family’s knowledge. Mike and Tina started to ask questions, and it became clear that they were not the only family that this had happened to. It now appears that there are about 70 families in the Hull area who share their experience. The ashes of those babies may have been left on the shelves of the funeral director’s offices. There was one instance of a baby being cremated, with no indication of an undertaker being used. Nobody seems to know quite how that happened.

When this all came to light, I went to see the council, because I knew that there had been similar instances in Shrewsbury and Scotland and that there had been inquiries about what had happened in those areas. It was on 27 March 2015 that I went to the council with Mike and Tina and we asked whether we could have an inquiry into what had happened to these 70-odd families. It took three and a half months for the council to say that no, it was not willing to do that. I felt that there was an injustice here and that these families needed to know what had happened to their babies’ ashes.

In February 2016, I went to see the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who, at that time, was Secretary of State for Justice. He wrote a letter to Hull City Council, which said:

“My fellow Secretaries of State at the Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government have agreed with me that there is a need for an historic investigation into the practices relating to infant cremations in the Hull area, and we have today jointly written to the Chief Executive of Hull City Council asking him to commission this. We have suggested that the Hull investigation should have terms of reference similar to those of the Emstrey inquiry.”

I was very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that. He met my constituents and was incredibly compassionate and understanding. It is really important to see a politician showing such kindness. However, unfortunately, Hull City Council said that it did not need to hold that inquiry and there was a change in Justice Secretary. Without any reference to me, Tina or any of the other families, the Ministry of Justice decided not to pursue the issue with Hull City Council. It accepted that Hull had done everything it needed to do and that everything was fine. I was not told that. I only found it out because the council told me that it was no longer considering holding an inquiry. I was livid and, as Members can imagine, my constituent was completely dismayed. She has now formed a group with the other families called Action for Ashes in Hull.

The families were absolutely dismayed, as their hope of getting the answer to what had happened was snatched away from them. However, the new Justice Secretary did write to Hull City Council, suggesting that it might like to meet the Action for Ashes group. The council refused to do that, saying that it was not willing to meet the group, but that it would meet me, Tina and one other parent. We had that meeting on 24 March 2017. I specifically asked for the full investigation that it said it had carried out to be published so that we could see what it had actually done. That took four months. On 25 July, my constituent Tina was given 27 minutes’ notice that the report was about to be published and given to the press. It was not sent to any of the other parents who were in the group.

A 22-page internal report was produced by Hull City Council, but so many questions still needed answering—questions, as I said at the outset, about why babies’ ashes were left on the shelves of funeral directors and why families were told there were no ashes in the first instance. None of that was properly addressed, and there was no investigation into the role the NHS had played or into the independent funeral directors who had been involved. The report also looked at just 2% of
the cremations that had been carried out in the area, whereas, in Shropshire, the Emsrey inquiry looked through all the records. In Hull, the report looked at what the families who had come forward and self-identified.

A year on from the last time I raised this issue in Parliament, Hull City Council still believes it has done everything it needs to do, despite families saying they still have not got the answers they need. I still do not understand why, in Shrewsbury and Scotland, an inquiry was appropriate, but one is not appropriate for the people I represent. There have never been clear answers and explanations about what happened. One Conservative Member made the point that there seems to be a fear that this will turn into a legal dispute and that there will be an opportunity for compensation. That is not what these families want; they just want to know what happened, why they were told things that were not true, and who knew what when. It is that basic information that they are still seeking.

I hope very much that come next year—I hope there will be a debate again, because this is an important issue, which we need to discuss each year—I do not have to come here and say, “I am still fighting to get a local authority to display the kindness and compassion this group of people truly deserves.” I am staggered that I am still having to fight this case, because it is absolutely obvious that an internal investigation is not sufficient. What we need is to have some fresh air in this case and to have someone independent come in, look at all the records and ask the families about what happened. That seems to me the best way forward, the kindest way forward and the way we will actually get justice and truth for these families finally.

7.57 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Let me start by saying how grateful I am to everybody who secured the extension of today’s business so that we have the opportunity to pay tribute to the families who have suffered the unimaginable loss of a child and to the professionals who provide irreplaceable care and support throughout a journey that no parent ever wants to take, and, in Baby Loss Awareness Week, to break the silence for bereaved parents, as the strapline for this year’s campaign says.

I also pay tribute to the APPG and to my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince), and to other Members from across the House, including the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who have spoken with such courage, dignity, passion and determination, enabling us to deal with this issue in a very open and honest way and to really move things forward. The hon. Lady was right to say that if we do not talk about things, nothing ever happens, and I commend everybody for telling their stories.

I want to tell two stories today, one of which I told in my debate in Westminster Hall before the recess, and which focused on bereavement support for employees. It is about a young guy in the west of Scotland, who was recently married and looking forward to becoming a dad for the first time, but whose son died at three days old. He received a phone call from his employer the day after his child’s death to say that because his son was dead and there was no baby, there was an expectation that he did not need the remainder of his parental leave and was therefore expected to come back to work the next day. The hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Pengelly) is right that there is an assumption that people are kind and decent and deal with things compassionately, but the truth in too many cases is that that is not the case.

The second story I want to talk about is about a family in my constituency, and it means a lot to me because it is the story of my office manager, whose daughter Rebecca died of TB meningitis. She had spent the last three months of her life in the Institute of Neurosciences in Glasgow’s children’s hospital. After several failed operations on her brain, her parents were told that there was no hope and that their daughter would die—their daughter, who had previously been fit and well and full of life, would die of a disease not usually associated with a first world, developed country. For the last three weeks of her life, she was transferred to Robin House, which is a most incredible children’s hospice run by Children’s Hospices Across Scotland in Balloch, near Loch Lomond.

The staff of Robin House gave Rebecca, her parents and the rest of her family a week devoted to giving her what I believe is called a “good death”. I am not sure there is ever such a thing, but in these circumstances perhaps that is the right term. It was a week where nothing else mattered, where the tasks that made an impossible situation in the hospital worse, like having to cook, do the laundry, travel, find a car parking space and look after other children, were all entirely dealt with. Rebecca died on 2 December 2009 in the arms of her parents, in a double bed that had been installed in her room from another part of the hospice, because no task was impossible for the staff of Robin House. Indeed, their support for Rebecca’s family continues several years on.

It is important to recognise that for the charities across the UK no task is impossible for the babies, children and parents they look after—from Bliss and its vision to give every baby born prematurely and sick in the UK the best chance of survival and quality of life, to Sands, which offers support to anyone affected by the death of a baby, the Miscarriage Association and its work offering support to anyone affected by miscarriage, and Together for Short Lives, whose mission is to secure the best quality of life and the best end of life for children who have short lives. In parents’ hours of need, absolutely nothing is insurmountable for both the paid staff and the volunteers in these organisations.

As we have heard, however, experiences outside the specialist palliative care environment can vary wildly. Hospital facilities do not always lend themselves well to the purpose of grieving. Not all health boards have dedicated bereavement rooms. They do not all have dedicated staff available. They do not all have rooms where parents can leave the noise and “life” of the hospital environment, which can make things so much harder and painful because it is so impersonal and sterile. Not all hospitals provide night-time accommodation for parents. Rebecca’s mum regularly slept in hospital coffee rooms overnight simply because there were not the facilities on the ward for her.

After death, when families are left devastated—some of them may have lost or given up their job and devoted themselves to being the sole carers for a sick child for
many months or possibly years—the support we as a society give them to grieve can make the difference between whether they are able to rebuild their lives or not. Someone said to me that when your child dies you are shattered and, like a smashed vase, you can put the pieces back together but you are never the same as you once were; you are never truly whole again. You may find a way to function in society, but you are not coping; you are never coping. The grief can come on almost randomly and indiscriminately and it can be overwhelming. We must acknowledge the fact that the psychological consequences of grieving for a child are lifelong. It is not something that will ever leave you.

I am talking today not with a list of statistics or data because this is not a debate for pie charts or graphs. It is more about trying to reinforce the message of Baby Loss Awareness Week, to break the silence for bereaved parents who need support, to break the silence to promote the outstanding work of charities such as CHAS, CLIC Sargent, the Rainbow Trust, Bliss and the many charities across the UK that have come together for Baby Loss Awareness Week, and, most importantly, to break the silence for children like Rebecca so they are never forgotten.

8.3 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Following on from the very moving and courageous speeches by hon. Members about Baby Loss Awareness Week, I rise as someone whose own family members have suffered from the trauma of baby loss. Stillbirths and neonatal deaths affect so many in our community, including in my Slough constituency. The son of my very good friend Councillor Madhuri Bedi was born prematurely. He had strep B, which gave him brain damage. The family had to make the harrowing decision to switch off his life support machine only one day into his precious life. As they remarked, there is very little awareness and not enough support. That is something that we all need to work towards.

I commend the excellent work done by so many individuals, campaigners and hon. Members, on a cross-party basis. I also pay tribute to members of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On that point, will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the recommendations in the updated clinical guidance from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which include the recommendation that all pregnant women should at the very least be provided with an information leaflet on group B strep, as a tool to raise awareness and prevent what he has just described?

Mr Dhesi: I fully concur with my hon. Friend and thank him for her intervention. In that regard, I would very much like to pay tribute to hon. Members in the all-party group. I look forward to joining them tomorrow to provide whatever little support I can.

It is wonderful to see the advances made and also the pledges made by the Minister, whether on maternity safety champions, funding for safety and training at hospitals or the national bereavement care pathway. I for one most sincerely hope that he and the Government will continue in this endeavour to ensure that we make further advances and minimise the trauma suffered by so many.

8.5 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who talked very touchingly about his own family experiences when they were affected by this terrible issue. It is also a privilege and an honour to speak in this debate in Baby Loss Awareness Week. Obviously it is humbling to hear all the different stories from fellow Members and parents on these Benches—they are such harrowing stories—and the bravery with which they are able to communicate them and raise this issue.

This is the most harrowing thing that can happen to any parent. I speak as a parent of four children, one of whom is about to reach his 21st birthday, but this is a fear that will never leave any of us, whatever age our children are. Although we got to four children, we had a number of mishaps and miscarriages along the way, and the hope for those affected is that as more children come along the way, that pain eases a little bit.

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to introduce my own private Member’s Bill to deal with some of these issues—actually, I have merely been passed the baton by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who has done so much work on this. My private Member’s Bill would allow parental bereavement leave. We heard an incredible story from my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who talked about an employer who would not let somebody affected by this terrible tragedy have time off work. That is absolutely outrageous, but the reality is that in those circumstances—the death of a child—there is no statutory requirement for an employer to let staff have time off. I cannot imagine the distress that that must cause people affected by these terrible tragedies—tragedy upon tragedy—or how terrible the effect must be on the workforce of that employer, with everybody having to hear about it.

Most employers, of course, do not take that approach. I speak as an employer, both here—we are employers in this place—and in my life before Parliament. As an employer, we would not need the Government or anybody else to tell us to give people affected by this tragedy leave. Of course we would do that, and we would pay them whatever pay they were due. Sadly we cannot be that generous in our private Member’s Bill, but I encourage all Members please to attend the Second Reading debate on my Bill next Friday, to contribute and to make sure that we look at all the issues and circumstances. It is wonderful to hear that people are willing to share their circumstances, because it will help us to make sure that the legislation is in the right place.

The Bill would require all employers to provide at least two weeks’ leave for all staff affected by this kind of tragedy. I am delighted that the Government are supporting the Bill, which gives us a very good chance, given the extended time we have to get it through—unfortunately my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester was unable to get it through in the last Session because of time constraints. It fits very neatly with the Government’s pledge to enhance rights and protections in the workplace, so it is exactly where we need to be. Making sure that every employer provides such protections for people in their time of loss is the least we can do.
I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester, for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) for their tremendous work in this area. Over the summer months, we have been working with employers, charities and unions to make sure that we get the legislation to the right place, as I am keen to do. The legislation will help bereaved parents not just of babies but of children all the way up to their 18th birthday.

I am sure that we all have touching stories from our own experience, or from constituents who have come to us. Some members of the all-party group will be familiar with Annika and James Dowson, and with Luke and Ruthie Heron. The Dowsons lost their little child, Gypsy, who was stillborn. The Herons lost Eli after 23 weeks and six days, but he managed to survive for another two and a half days. Had he not done so, their loss would have been classed as a miscarriage rather than a stillbirth. They are championing the need to look at the legislation in that regard, and Annika and James put all their efforts into raising money for a bereavement suite in Scarborough. There are some tremendous and touching stories of the hope that has come out of these tragedies. If the Bill eases the unimaginable pain of just one family, our collective efforts will be worthwhile.

8.11 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I pay tribute to the bravery of the many people who have described very personal and moving experiences in the Chamber this evening. I have experienced this issue from a different angle, in a professional capacity. As a consultant paediatrician, I have been privileged to see many hundreds of babies come into the world. I can honestly say that the joy and the miracle of that event, in whatever circumstances, is not diminished by having seen it on numerous occasions.

As a junior doctor, one is fortunate to see many happy occasions when babies are born in good health and at full-term. As a consultant, one is called only when either the mum or the baby is in significant trouble. That might be when the baby is very premature, when the baby or mum is very sick—for example, following a road traffic accident or with sepsis, which we have heard about here before—or when the baby is, sadly, born without a heart rate.

I can remember occasions from my professional experience when I have had to give parents the news that nobody—I speak as a parent of three—ever wants to hear, and no doctor ever wants to give: that a baby or child is, sadly, going to die. I remember holding one particular infant in my arms, because his parents were not able to do so, as he passed away. There is no doubt that we need to do everything we can—NHS professionals work very hard every day—to make sure that that does not happen, but unfortunately it does. I welcome the Government’s target to reduce the incidence of stillbirth by 50% by 2030.

I want to talk about some of the changes that have been made during my career. I graduated as a doctor in 2001, and I worked as a consultant paediatrician in the NHS, particularly in neonatal care. A number of changes in neonatal care have led to improvements over this time. There has been an increasing centralisation of neonatal care, so that the smallest and sickest infants are cared for in areas of significant expertise. This has helped to reduce mortality, particularly for the smallest and sickest babies. It has also led to a need for transportation. A baby who is born in a small district general hospital may need to be transferred many miles—sometimes hundreds of miles—to a hospital that has the expertise to care for their particular problem. When I was a junior doctor, that meant the doctor who was on shift, such as me, getting into the back of a 999-called ambulance and taking the baby in an incubator to wherever they needed to go.

Over the past few years, that has changed considerably. We now have clinical networks and areas of the country are divided up into patches in which there is a dedicated clinical team, led by a consultant neonatologist, with nurses and doctors who have specialised in this area. In many cases, there is a dedicated ambulance, as well as helicopter transport, to come and retrieve babies from whichever hospital they are born in and to take them to such a centre of expertise. That has been a big improvement in the care we offer children during the time that I have been a doctor.

As was mentioned earlier, another thing we have done is to focus much more on the lessons that we can learn. As a doctor, the first infant I saw who died was a young boy whose death was, sadly, entirely preventable. There was an investigation and lessons have been learned, but that does not take away from the horror of the occasion. It was an awful experience for the family, and it was traumatic for everybody involved. As an introduction to being a junior doctor—although I took no responsibility for it all medically—it was very traumatic, as it was for everybody.

We now have regular meetings to look at the cases of children or infants who have died, suffered significant injury or become more unwell than we anticipated, and where any type of adverse event has occurred. Such cases are looked at in detail by a multidisciplinary team, which goes stepwise through the process from the child being conceived or being referred to hospital and asks what has happened, why it has happened, what could have been done better and what would have changed the outcome. Although we would like to prevent every case, the reality is that, while we will get closer to doing so, we will never prevent every death, in my view. We should, however, prevent every one that can be prevented, and I very much welcome the Minister’s statement about improving the way in which cases are reviewed and about making that a statutory requirement.

I welcome the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), in relation to child bereavement leave. He is right to say that most employers, like him, are very flexible in dealing with people whose infant may be very unwell in hospital for several months at a time, but some are not, and that places an enormous pressure on such people. I also welcome the national bereavement care pathway. All the hospitals in which I have worked have had bereavement rooms and I think they provided good care to bereaved parents and families, although I know that that is not accepted as a universal statement.

Will the Minister look in detail at the evidence on group B streptococcal infections, and at any evidence relating to whether women should be screened for that in pregnancy?
[Dr Caroline Johnson]

The centralisation of tertiary neonatal services has been a good thing in making the survival outcomes for babies better. We are now focusing not just on survival but on improving the quality of life, particularly for pre-term infants, such as by improving ventilator settings so that their vision is improved and their lung function is better as they grow up. However, centralisation also has an impact on families. For example, for a baby born in my constituency, the nearest tertiary neonatal centre is Nottingham, and if it does not have a bed, they might be sent further afield to Sheffield, Leicester or Norwich. For people looking after older children at home—having to take them to school, for instance—trying to manage having a baby several hours’ journey away will have a huge impact on the family. It also has significant cost implications, and I not infrequently see parents, particularly in working families on low incomes, who are struggling with the financial implications of travelling to visit their desperately sick baby who is several hours away.

Overall, I think there have been many welcome announcements in this field today.

8.18 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): May I say how honoured and humbled I am to follow so many hon. Members on both sides of the House who have made moving speeches about their own experiences, and those with very deep professional knowledge, chief among whom are the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson)? May I also thank all the members of the all-party group—we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach)—whose passion for and commitment to this most important of all causes really shines through, as I am sure everybody on both sides of the House agrees? I thank all those who have spoken today through their own pain, as well as all those constituents who have written to all of us to enable us to raise in the Chamber a cause that matters. I welcome those constituents who have written to all of us to enable us to raise in the Chamber a cause that matters. I welcome those constituents who have written to all of us to enable us to raise in the Chamber a cause that matters.

In my brief comments today, I shall give voice to concerns that my constituents have raised, and I want to support all my colleagues, on both sides of the House, who are working so hard to make change, reducing the number of deaths in these most tragic circumstances and providing help to parents when, regrettably, deaths do occur. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury for mentioning my little boy Henry. I am experiencing the joy of being a new father. I can only imagine the trauma that any parent would feel, having lost someone in those circumstances. There is no doubt that a greater trauma for a parent could not be imagined.

I shall take a brief look at the statistics. As has been said, this is a very human subject—not one for pie charts or statistics—but I think we ought to look at them, if only to consider how far we have to go, and how much more space we need to cover to get close to a situation where stillbirths, and births in labour and shortly afterwards, are reduced to the lowest possible level. One in four pregnancies will end in miscarriage; 200,000 mothers and their families are affected every year; 3,245 stillbirths were recorded in 2014 by MBRRACE-UK. In 46% of stillbirths, the causes are unknown. That is a horrifyingly high statistic, and it is vital that we continue—I am grateful for the Government’s efforts in this respect—to research, so that we can find out the causes of as many conditions as possible. It surely is not something we can be happy about, or be content to tolerate, that the rate of stillbirth in this country is higher than in so many European countries, including Germany, Sweden, Poland and Estonia.

It is a sad fact that in so many cases, the causes of death are potentially avoidable. Many who have spoken today have far greater experience and knowledge than I have, and I do not pretend to tell the House about those points, but it seems to me that the Government should consider mounting an education campaign so that mothers can, where possible, avoid any risks—the risks, for example, of smoking in pregnancy are well known, and they need to be made clear to everybody—and recognise the signs of an impending problem.

Antoinette Sandbach: The MAMA Academy creates some fantastic wallets. I suggest that my hon. Friend writes to his local hospital trust and urges them to provide those wallets to their mothers-to-be. I know that the Countess of Chester is doing that for mums served by that trust. Each wallet has a lot of information on the front, which helps parents know when they should start worrying, because it alerts them to the signs that mean they should go to hospital and get scanned.

Robert Courts: I am very grateful for that helpful intervention. I will almost certainly do that. [Interruption.] No doubt my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury will assist. That will be most welcome to mothers—and indeed fathers, who of course worry equally about such risk factors. That will be a great deal of help.

I wonder whether the Government would also consider the subject of scans. I am conscious that in this country we do not scan past 20 weeks, and that in Finland, which has one of the lowest rates of stillbirth in the world, there are much more frequent scans, continuing into the third trimester. Indeed, in that country, they also have regular checks on very young children. I appreciate that there are many important claims on resources, but ask the Government to continue to look at that because the causal link between Finland’s success and regular checks should be considered.

The theme of Baby Loss Awareness Week is support for bereaved parents and today, of all days, is World Mental Health Day. When tragic circumstances occur, all possible support must be available to parents. Nothing will ever make amends for the loss of a child and nothing will ever take them back to the day before that loss occurred. As anyone who has lost someone will realise, however, while the situation is never “better”, the realisation that you are not alone can and does help. We ought to bring that support to as many people as possible. I welcome the Government’s bereavement care pathway and the assistance provided for it by the all-party group.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is in his place, is introducing a private Member’s Bill. One would like to think that employers would be sympathetic in such circumstances:
that is a basic, human and natural reaction. I am very
grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East
Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who gave us a very
clear example of when that is not always the case.
If ever there were a clear example of why the Bill is
necessary, we have heard it today—and of course I support
it. Compassion, as well as the time and support to grieve,
is vital for parents in such tragic circumstances.

I would like to end my brief comments on a local
note. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member
for Banbury for mentioning Horton General hospital,
and I support and echo everything she says. Her passion
is clear to all. Like her, I remain of the view that
downgrading Horton’s maternity services is unsafe. I
remain of the view that asking mothers in the late stages
of labour to travel on the very congested roads between
Banbury and Oxford, or from the north of west Oxfordshire
in my constituency to Oxford, is unsafe. I fear for the
consequences if that situation is sustained. I deplore the
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concerns over the future of their midwifery-led unit. It
is not helpful to look at such services in isolation.

The people of Chipping Norton have equally valid
concerns over the future of their midwifery-led unit. It
is clearly critical in such an isolated rural area, where
the weather has an effect on traffic on our congested
roads, for expectant mothers and families to have access
to full, high-quality midwifery and obstetrics care
throughout the whole of Banbury and the north of west
Oxfordshire. I will continue to work with my hon.
Friend the Member for Banbury and others to ensure
access throughout west Oxfordshire to the very highest
quality maternity services.

8.28 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):
This has been a compelling debate, which has once
again shown the House at its best. I welcome the fact
that we are discussing these issues again in the Chamber
as part of Baby Loss Awareness Week. I hope that these
extremely valuable debates will become an annual fixture,
because they provide us with a very valuable opportunity
to raise awareness of the work of the 40 baby loss
charities who work together as the Baby Loss Awareness
Week Alliance. They also give us the opportunity to
assess what progress has been made in meeting our
shared ambitions to improve prevention, treatment and
bereavement care.

I recognise the work of the all-party group on baby
loss. It is true to say, as a number of Members have
today, that it has played a key role in ensuring that this
issue is kept at the top of the Government’s agenda, and
that some of the taboos that have so often surrounded
this subject are broken down. There have been a number
of excellent contributions from Members on all sides
and I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to draw
attention to some of them.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran
(Patricia Gibson) mentioned coroners’ inquests and
fatal accident inquiries for stillbirths—an issue she has
raised on a number of occasions. I pay tribute to her for
her persistence in that campaign. She certainly made a
compelling case that such inquiries would inform good
practice and, more importantly, bereaved parents may
get answers that they have not previously had.

The hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) spoke
with great passion and personal experience, and in his
capacity as the co-chair of the APPG. He touched on a
range of issues and highlighted the importance of mental
health. I was rather troubled by what the hon. Member
for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) said. I certainly recognise
her description of a culture of defensiveness in certain
trusts. She was absolutely right that most parents want
answers, not compensation. We need to do more about the
way in which the NHS handles these issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South
(Lilian Greenwood) told us about her constituents, Jack
and Sarah, who have recently spoken publicly about the
tragic circumstances of the death of their daughter,
Harriet. They felt that what they were told was not
correct and want coroners’ inquests to be available for
stillborn children. As my hon. Friend said, there seems
to be growing cross-party support for such a move. I
assure her that the Opposition Front Bench will do
what we can to assist in making that campaign a reality.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach),
who also co-chairs the APPG, was right to pay tribute
to the NHS staff who have really taken up the challenge
laid down by the APPG of improving the experience for
parents. She rightly drew attention to the wider public
health factors that we need an awful lot more work on,
and raised an important point about the need for CCGs
to commission bereavement counselling consistently across
the board. It is often a concern that CCGs do not
commission services consistently across the country, so
more examination and accountability is required.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull
North (Diana Johnson) spoke about her constituent’s
son, William, whose ashes were scattered without his
family’s knowledge. She spoke about this in the debate
last year, so I am sorry to hear that there are still many
unanswered questions. I hope that she does not have to
come back to this debate next year to raise the same
issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi)
spoke about the terrible circumstances affecting one of
his constituents and the need to improve awareness of
group B strep. In last year’s debate, the right hon.
Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) advised
the House that one baby a day develops group B strep.
We should be able to do a lot more about that, given
that it is a largely preventable infection.

The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin
Hollinrake) highlighted well the gaps in the law on
bereavement leave. I wish him success with his private
Member’s Bill. He made the valid point that we are also
employers, so it is probably worth us examining the
Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority terms
and conditions following the debate to see whether
there is anything more we can do to ensure that we are
an exemplar.

We were privileged to hear from the hon. Member for
Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), given her
professional experience. She conveyed well how difficult
it is for staff in some of these situations. Her reflections
on her last 16 years in practice were informative and positive,
and she made some excellent points about areas in which we can do better. I hope the Minister will take those points on board.

As we have heard from many hon. Members’ contributions today and in previous debates, the efforts of people here and among the public have gone a long way towards breaking down taboos. I pay tribute to those who have done so and the efforts of others in the public eye to raise awareness. For example, “Coronation Street” had a storyline involving a stillbirth earlier this year. I am sure that such television programmes have an even greater reach than Parliament TV. What made that storyline so poignant was that Kim Marsh, whose character portrayed the stillbirth onscreen, herself suffered a bereavement eight years before. She said of the broadcast that “sharing is absolutely imperative to being able to put the pieces of your jigsaw back together”. That is incredibly sound advice.

Many parents have spoken of the isolation they can feel, and we have heard from hon. Members today about how that has been a taboo subject for a very long time and about the difficulty people can have in discussing the loss of their child for what seems like many years. A constituent of mine, Nicole Bowles, is in that situation. She has set up a campaign, called Our Missing Piece, to make it easier for parents to let other people know that their family is missing a loved one. She has designed a badge for bereaved parents to wear as a way of telling the world that they are dealing with child loss. Her ambition is very simple but could have a very positive impact. She says:

“I hope that by creating this badge it helps to show that: It’s OK to talk to us; It’s okay to ask if we’re alright; It’s okay to say their name.”

I commend her campaign and I hope that this debate has gone some way to conveying the sentiments she expresses about the need to talk about these issues and break down the barriers that have been there for too long.

We know from the recent review of stillbirths and neonatal deaths in UK that of the 872,720 births in 2015, 3,032 were stillbirths and 1,360 were neonatal deaths. This amounts to about 12 stillbirths or neonatal deaths every day. That is a huge number of families each and every week experiencing one of the biggest, if not the biggest, tragedy of their lives. It is a difficult figure to process, particularly because, as the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) said, sometimes these deaths could have been avoided.

It is of course positive that perinatal mortality has decreased in this country, but the level of progress has not been good enough. According to The Lancet, the annual rate of stillbirth reduction in the UK has been slower than that in the vast majority of high-income countries. One of the key reasons for that is the high level of variability in the services offered. This country offers some of the best neonatal care in the world, along with some exemplary psychological and bereavement support, but unfortunately that is not available equally to everyone. Last year, NHS England reported a 25% variation in stillbirth rates across England. That is a startling figure, but it demonstrates that we have the capability to meet and exceed the Government’s target to reduce the number of stillbirths by 20% before 2021 if we ensure that everyone has access to the very best care and treatment. I welcome the progress the Minister referred to earlier towards meeting that target, and I hope that he will be able to update us annually on progress. I also invite him to consider whether it would be appropriate to expand the scope of the Government’s ambitions to focus also on reducing the number of premature births, given that prematurity contributes to a significant number of stillbirths and neonatal deaths each year.

As well as variability, another area where we need to make significant progress is ensuring safe staffing levels at all times on all neonatal units. The 2015 Bliss report “Hanging in the Balance” found that 64% of neonatal units did not have enough nurses to meet the national standards on safe staffing and that 70% of neonatal intensive care units regularly looked after more babies than was considered safe. As we know from exchanges this morning in departmental questions, there are huge challenges in the workforce at the moment, and the Government have set out their strategy to deal with them, so I hope that we will see progress. It is certainly something that we will be monitoring closely.

Finally, I turn to the key theme of this year’s Baby Loss Awareness Week, which the hon. Member for Colchester referred to: bereavement care. This is an area that stretches from the level of support available immediately following a neonatal death to the medium and long-term support available to families. I welcome yesterday’s announcement on the national bereavement care pathway, which will see 11 sites in England trial the use of new materials, guidelines and training for professionals. The trial, leading to a full roll-out in a year’s time, has the potential to tackle long-standing and unacceptable variances in bereavement care and ensure that all bereaved parents are offered equal, high-quality, individualised, safe and sensitive care, which is something everyone in the House wants to see.

I suspect that the challenge of a successful roll-out will be ensuring that sufficient time is set aside for the training that staff will need. I welcome the news from the Minister about the funds and support that will be available for the delivery of that training, but we must recognise that training is a continuing process, and we must keep an eye on progress in the years to come. As I said earlier, another big challenge is ensuring that the workforce are in a position to deliver the pathway. Last year, Sands found that 30% of maternity units did not have a specialist bereavement midwife based there, while Bliss has found that 30% of neonatal units do not have access to any psychological support.

There is also a need for capital investment. We have heard from a number of Members today about the importance of bereavement suites, and we know that one in three trusts and health boards does not have a dedicated bereavement room in each maternity unit. I am aware that the Government have ambitious plans to release significant parts of the NHS estate, and I should be grateful if the Minister could reassure us that there will be consideration of the shortfall in the number of bereavement suites before any disposals proceed.

There is much more to be done, but I think the hon. Member for Edisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) summed up the position well when she said that, for the first time, there was some hope. Let us continue to move forward in that spirit.
Mr Dunne: I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to some of the points that have been raised during this excellent debate. It is important to recognise and welcome the cross-party support from Members, including the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). We heard 14 contributions from other Members, including five, by my count, who have personally suffered—or their families have suffered—the loss or miscarriage of a baby, as well as two from experienced doctors: my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who brought their particular expertise to the debate. I am grateful for the support from Members on both sides of the House for the Government’s action plan—for what we have done in the 12 months since our last debate on this subject, and for what we are planning to do.

A number of issues have been raised today. I will not go into detail about Members’ constituency concerns, although I will say to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) that when, as a Shropshire Member, I was dealing with one of my constituents who suffered an inability to find out what had happened to the ashes of the baby they had lost, which was similar to what occurred in Hull, my experience was of talking to the local authority and persuading it that this was the right thing to do. I should be happy to help the hon. Lady, if she needs help from the Department, to emphasise again to her local authority that it is indeed the right thing to do.

Members have challenged me on a couple of issues, particularly that of coroners’ reports. We are introducing a perinatal mortality review tool to allow investigations to be undertaken, with information collated in a manner that can then inform and be learned from. We will watch with interest what happens in Scotland, but at this point I think we need to get the tool working and see how it goes. In my opening speech, I mentioned the health service safety investigations branch on which we are consulting. We envisage it as having a role in looking at some of the more extreme cases, but only if it decides to do so.

A number of colleagues talked about the use of private Members’ Bills to try to drive this agenda forward. I can confirm to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) that the Government will support his Bill on bereavement leave, which was also mentioned in the excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). I cannot promise that we will support all the other measures that the all-party parliamentary group comes up with, but we will certainly look at them with interest.

Following last night’s launch of the national bereavement care pathway, I am particularly pleased, in Baby Loss Awareness Week, that that has received so much support from the APPG, the charities and the healthcare professionals who work in this field. Finally, let me say a big thank you to all the midwives, doctors and healthcare support workers who do such a fantastic job, delivering more than 700,000 babies successfully and also helping parents who, sadly, do not experience the happiness of a healthy baby.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Baby Loss Awareness Week.

**Business without Debate**

**ADJOURNMENT (FEBRUARY, EASTER, MAY DAY AND WHITSUN)**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25).*

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 8 February 2018, do adjourn until Tuesday 20 February 2018; at its rising on Thursday 29 March 2018, do adjourn until Monday 16 April 2018; at its rising on Thursday 3 May 2018 do adjourn until Tuesday 8 May 2018; and at its rising on Thursday 24 May 2018, do adjourn until Monday 4 June 2018. —(Craig Whittaker.)

*Question agreed to.*
Devolution: Yorkshire

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

8.45 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a particular pleasure to open this debate on Yorkshire devolution with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, because you have a distinguished record as a former Minister for Yorkshire, and at a time when Yorkshire needed a strong Minister, bringing together the world of politics, business and local authorities. I suggest that we are at a similar moment in our history. We need a strong elected voice to champion the whole of Yorkshire as our economy and our businesses face the challenges of Brexit.

All Yorkshiremen and women pride themselves on calling a spade a spade, and sometimes in our political lives we can fall victims to that. I retired from this House in 2010 and never expected to return. I quickly realised the trueness of the statement that there is nothing more ex than an ex-MP.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): No!

John Grogan: I am afraid so, Minister, as one day you might find out.

I returned to my former constituency to knock on doors in Heslington in support of a former council colleague. I wondered whether the resident at the first door I knocked on might recognise me. He opened the door, gave me one look and said, “The return of the living dead.” I want to be as frank as that former constituent in my comments to the House this evening, but I also want to suggest a way forward and possible compromises and conciliation. I will also speak about the Sheffield city region deal, much diminished though it now is.

Let me start by examining a proposal that has been signed by 17 Labour and Conservative councils—when last I checked, not one had withdrawn its name. They are proposing a single mayor and a single combined authority for the areas they represent, which is perfectly in line with the current law, as the Minister has agreed in a parliamentary answer. I want to consider not what might happen in future Parliaments, but what we can achieve in this Parliament, because, representing God’s own county, we all have a responsibility to do that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman feel that we have a responsibility to consider all the options? He mentioned 17 local authority leaders. The nine across north Yorkshire, who did sign up to the One Yorkshire deal in principle, are keen to explore the option of Greater Yorkshire, which is a deal on the table that we could progress today. Does he not think that we should be exploring that option?

John Grogan: Interestingly, none of those nine local authorities has yet withdrawn its name from the 17 that signed up to explore the Yorkshire deal. Some have admitted to me that they have benefited from re-education at last week’s Conservative party conference and now better understand the Government’s position, but Councillor Carl Les, who is a very good friend of mine from my days in north Yorkshire, said today that he still favours the widest possible deal. He doubted whether he could persuade the Minister, but I am more confident that we can do so.

It is interesting to look at the geography, because it includes the north of the Humber but not the south, and I recognise that there would need to be strong links between the north and the south however this plays out. The proposed combined authority would control things such as transport. On the basis of deals elsewhere, it might have £150 million to spend that is currently spent by Whitehall. It would look after skills, and there are some imaginative proposals, including that the regional schools commissioner should report to the mayor because we need to improve the performance of Yorkshire’s academies. The mayor would also oversee the team that promotes international trade in Yorkshire.

There are lots of exciting ideas, but it is Yorkshire’s identity that matters to me. Whether at Keighley Cougars, Sheffield United, Sheffield Wednesday or Leeds United, people do not chant, “Sheffield city region!” or “South Yorkshire!”; they chant, “Yorkshire!” [Interruption.] Anytime that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) wants to intervene, I will obviously take that intervention.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am just storing it up.

John Grogan: I thought so.

One newspaper that comes out of this whole saga with credit is The Yorkshire Post, and I want to read just two sentences from its editorial this morning:

“This debate is a litmus test which will define the future relationship between Ministers and Yorkshire. While the city-region model may be working elsewhere, a Yorkshire-wide devolution deal has the potential to be truly transformative and Ministers will not be thanked if they’re unable to recognise the once-in-a-generation opportunity that exists at long last.”

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case for the Greater Yorkshire deal. Devolution is all about local people making choices about their future and controlling their destiny. Seventeen authorities have come together to say that they want this deal, so the Minister should meet them and the MPs involved to get the deal under way. We cannot lag behind.

John Grogan: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. All that the 17 councils are asking for is talks, which the Minister has not yet agreed to. This House quite rightly prides itself on the fact that we have had devolution through consent from both parties in more difficult places than Yorkshire, such as Northern Ireland, and we are now telling the Spanish Government that they must have talks with Catalonia. If they can do that, why cannot the Government have talks with 17 Yorkshire council leaders?

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, because we started with a proposal for a West Yorkshire mayor and then for a lesser Yorkshire mayor, and we now have one for a Greater Yorkshire mayor. This should be less about the political colour of the mayor and more about councillors and other politicians working together to
make swift decisions so that the people of Yorkshire, and particularly Batley and Spen, can make the most of this opportunity to regenerate our glorious, wonderful Yorkshire.

John Grogan: I could not have put it better. This is not just about the councils, because business also backs the proposal. I saw Jonathan Oxley, the regional chairman of the Institute of Directors, on television this morning, and Bill Adams of the TUC is among the opinion formers in Yorkshire who are very much behind the proposal.

I share many things with the Minister, one of which is that neither of us wakes up on election morning knowing that we will win—we fight marginal seats. Some of my hon. Friends have argued that the Labour party should not propose something that we would not definitely win. Equally, I am sure that some civil servants in Westminster have that traditional metropolitan fear of too strong a body in Yorkshire, which perhaps dates back in folk memory to when York was the capital of Viking England. We need a strong political voice in Yorkshire to argue for things such as better transport. Transport spending in Yorkshire is only £1 per head compared with £10 per head in London. We in Yorkshire are also 20% more likely to die young than those in the south-east, so we need a strong political voice to change things in our society.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful argument. To bring him back to the sporting analogy, we had the grand final at the weekend—sadly, Keighley Cougars were not there, but Leeds and Castleford were—and it was played in Manchester. Is that not the point? While Manchester carries on with devolution and is moving forward, Yorkshire is not. Forget the politics, we have to move forward with devolution now.

John Grogan: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, although I would say that Keighley Cougars will rise again. We are missing out in Yorkshire. Take the Commonwealth games. They are possibly going to Birmingham; Yorkshire was not even in the frame, and that is because we do not have a strong, powerful voice arguing that things such as the Commonwealth games should come to us. I would want a competitive election, which a devolution deal based on the whole of Yorkshire would bring.

Mr Betts rose—

John Grogan: I was about to move on to the Sheffield city region deal, so this is the moment for me to give way.

Mr Betts: I will let my hon. Friend expand on that point, then I will come in.

John Grogan: I thought my hon. Friend was rising to intervene.

Mr Betts: I will in a second.

John Grogan: Perhaps to encourage my hon. Friend to do so, let me say that I am afraid that the Sheffield city region deal is much diminished. Obviously, Barnsley and Doncaster signed up, and there was the hope that various authorities in Derbyshire would be involved. Sadly, that has now changed. Although the deal is about the same in terms of money—slightly more than Manchester, but quite a bit less than the west of England—if we look at the powers we can do better in the whole of Yorkshire. There is no housing investment fund in the Sheffield city region deal, no control of railway stations and no community infrastructure levy. All those things are held by the Mayor of Manchester, so why do we have to have second best in Yorkshire? We can negotiate better than that across the whole of Yorkshire.

Mr Betts: Can I come in on that point?

John Grogan: I think that this would be an appropriate point for that.

Mr Betts: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. He accuses the Government of not talking, but they have talked at great length to the leaders of councils and to councils in the Sheffield city region. When the deal was signed up to by the four council leaders in the South Yorkshire districts in 2014, that was before Chesterfield and Bassetlaw came in. They came in at a later stage and if they had not, the deal would have been agreed and an election would have been held this year for an elected mayor. That will now happen next year. All those four leaders signed up to the election and the statutory instrument is being put through. I ask my hon. Friend to do a deal for his constituency and the rest of Yorkshire, and not to let our deal be held up on that basis.

John Grogan: I am slightly disappointed, as I was hoping that my hon. Friend would announce his candidacy for Sheffield city mayor, but I will give way if he decides to make such an announcement tonight. The plain fact of the matter for my hon. Friend and for the Government is whether they are seriously going to impose an expensive mayoral election on the people of South Yorkshire when two of the four authorities are opposed to it. Are they seriously going to do that for a mayor who will have no powers and no money?

I am all in favour of all-party talks and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East has been working closely with the Government on this, but I would ask him, the Government and John Mothersole, who is the chief executive of South Yorkshire and a distinguished public servant, but perhaps a little too associated with one deal, whether we could try another plan—the best chief executives always have a plan A, a plan B, a plan C and a plan D—which I will suggest in a spirit of compromise. Members of all parties at a local and national level have been ringing me up over the past few days. Some have suggested a staged approach if there was a commitment to all-Yorkshire devolution. My hon. Friend has said himself that he would not rule that out in the future. Our good colleague, and former MP, Richard Caborn, has said the same. He would not rule that out. Could we not do it now? We could bring it in very rapidly. Perhaps we could have that staged approach with a mayoral election in South Yorkshire followed by an all-Yorkshire election a couple of years later. Those are possibilities.

I have one more suggestion to make to the Minister in a moment, but I just want to look briefly at one other factor. I said yesterday that an idea is serious once people start betting on it, and I noted today that a book
has been opened on the first Yorkshire mayor. I was rather surprised that I was at 4-1. I am not sure whether anybody, even a member of my family, has put a bet on today, but I am ruling myself out. Various other hon. Members are on the list, but I will not embarrass them. I will say only that Jessica Ennis-Hill is at 33-1 and it surprises me that she is the first woman on that list, because there are many, many strong candidates. I can think of four women council leaders in Yorkshire off the top of my head, and it would be something if Yorkshire were to have the first female major metropolitan mayor.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** When the Select Committee took evidence from Lord Kerslake about devolution, he made it clear that a stepping stone approach may well work in terms of different devolution deals. Why would the hon. Gentleman not now commit to moving ahead with Greater Yorkshire? What is it about Doncaster and Barnsley that is so attractive to Keighley that he needs those in a deal in order to move ahead with it? Why is that?

**John Grogan:** In direct response to that, let me conclude with a suggestion to the Minister. It is possible that he will not initiate talks tonight. I hope he will—I have great hope and faith—but he may just not do so. This Minister from a Lancashire constituency—I put it delicately—may tell us a lot about his three happy years as a student in Sheffield, and we are looking forward to hearing about that, but it is just possible that to solve this problem we need a higher authority than the Minister—the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister or even the Prime Minister’s hero, Geoffrey Boycott. I am secretary of the all-party group on Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire and I have written to the Archbishop of York asking him to consider calling a meeting of all those involved in the devolution process to try to make some progress, which the people of Yorkshire sorely need. The Archbishop of York’s office has told me that he is supportive of the process of Yorkshire devolution, and he will closely examine the proposals of the 17 councils involved and will be in contact with the bishops of Leeds and Sheffield about the most appropriate course of action to take.

So I leave the Minister with two questions. Are the Government against the principle of One Yorkshire devolution or, as various hon. Members have suggested, would they be prepared to accept it as the final destination on an agreed staged process over the next two or three years? Secondly, if it is forthcoming, would the Minister accept an invitation from the Archbishop of York, even if he will not initiate talks himself, to take part in talks on Yorkshire devolution and how the people of Yorkshire can get what many of the great cities of England already have?

9.2 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is great to have a Yorkshire woman MP in the Chair for this debate. Devolved decision making over the past 20 years has been like a game of snakes and ladders; we have been up ladders and down snakes. We have had Yorkshire Forward and the Yorkshire Assembly, as part of the regional settlement; it is worth noting that only two of the Government regions in England which are still in use for a number of functions are not points on a compass and reflect a geographic area. The first is London, which has had its devolution settlement with the Mayor and Assembly since 1999, and the second is Yorkshire. After the regional development agencies were abolished, Government policy moved on to the local enterprise partnerships and combined authorities, and now Government policy is for metro mayors and city regions.

In Yorkshire these structures are still opaque and confusing for most people. People in many of our towns and cities would not recognise themselves as being part of a city region, but they understand the idea of Yorkshire. Yorkshire people are proud of being part of Yorkshire, and it is time that our identity and regional uniqueness were acknowledged, and not dismissed by this Government. If our region could speak with a single voice, it would be a player on the world stage, rather than on the national stage. As my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) said, both industry and the unions have backed the One Yorkshire model. They want to develop region-wide hubs around IT, tourism, food and advanced manufacturing, including low-carbon and renewable energy, helping to create 21st-century jobs and 21st-century solutions which can be the envy of the world and start to rebalance our economy away from London. That is the most important goal for our region and others.

Yorkshire’s cultural achievements are legion: the world’s first ever film was filmed in 1888 in Roundhay; the first ever football club, Sheffield FC, was founded in 1874; and, as hon. Members might recall, in the London 2012 Olympics if Yorkshire had been a country it would have finished 12th in the medals table. Obviously, that is not forgetting this weekend’s eighth super league grand final win by Leeds Rhinos from my constituency. Yorkshire pudding is an integral part of our national dish, the Sunday roast.

Our whole character is based on our regional cultural establishment. This year, we have had the UK city of culture in Hull, which has been a platform not just for Hull, great as it was, but for the whole of Yorkshire. Leeds is bidding to be the European capital of culture in 2023. How good would it be to be part of a One Yorkshire authority where we could all amplify that achievement globally? Furthermore, Yorkshire’s interconnectivity and transport issues need a single voice.

9.4 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Jake Berry): I congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) on securing such an important debate.

In May this year, just five months ago, six metro mayors were elected to the combined authorities in England. Those six mayors—three in the northern powerhouse—have the power to create jobs, improve skills, drive forward their local economy and improve transport. Already they are creating a single point of accountability for residents, and have become powerful advocates for their area. Let us consider two of them. Ben Houchen in the Tees Valley has created the first mayoral development corporation outside London and is already attracting not just national but international businesses to the Tees Valley so that he can turn around SSI—Sahaviriya Steel Industries—steelworks. One mayor, one point of accountability driving forward his economy.
Andy Burnham, who will be familiar to those on the Labour Benches, is the metro mayor for the great city of Manchester. In one of the most striking acts of leadership that I have seen, he stood strong, representing his city and our whole nation, against a terrorist outrage that took place in that city just days after he was elected. One city, one mayor standing together against terrorism.

As with all devolution settlements across the United Kingdom, the process of passing powers from central Government to our regions is a one-way street. Metro mayors are already asking the Government what happens once they have fully implemented their devolution deal. What is the next natural step to return power, money and influence to their region?

These early adopters, these mayors, are viewed with envy by the residents and the business communities around them. When people turn on their telly and see Ben Houchen, Steve Rotheram and Andy Burnham standing there with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as they did this summer, they naturally ask—as I have been asked in Yorkshire—why is my area being left behind?

The metro mayors, created by this Government, form a partnership of equals with Government. They sit at the top table to talk about housing, economic development and, crucially, Brexit. That is why this Government believe that the South Yorkshire devolution deal should proceed. There can be no devolution two without a devolution one going on in the first place.

The hon. Member for Keighley asked why Manchester has so many powers. Manchester and its mayor have currently negotiated four deals with the Government. The Sheffield city region deal is the start of devolution, not the end of it. As a Conservative Government, we are not making a narrow political point. We will not gain any advantage from having a South Yorkshire mayor. I guess that the people of Barnsley, Rotherham, Doncaster and Sheffield deserve the devolution that they have been promised.

Those areas came together in 2015 and asked this Government for the deal. We believed then—and still believe now—that passing power and money from Whitehall to those town halls can transform the lives of people in South Yorkshire. Then Barnsley, Rotherham, Doncaster and Sheffield reaffirmed their commitment to the deal—not once, not twice but on three separate occasions. At their request, not the Government’s request, we legislated on two occasions to put ourselves in the position that we are in today. It is the law of the land, debated in this House, passed by this House, and voted on by this House that the mayoral election in the Sheffield city region will take place on 3 May 2018. The Sheffield city region deal is by all measures a good deal. It will bring £30 million a year of new Government money into one of the most deprived regions of the UK. It is one of the most generous devolution deals the Government have agreed. It equates to £22 per person per year in the Sheffield city region, compared with just £11 in Manchester.

On 3 May 2018, when the new South Yorkshire mayor is elected, the people of South Yorkshire—not the politicians—will, just like the people of the Tees Valley, Manchester and Liverpool, have a strong local voice to represent them at the top table with the Government.

While it is unfortunate that two of the local authorities that signed up to that deal in its original form have not consented to proceed to consult on the powers of the mayor, I can confirm that, as far as the Conservative party is concerned, I spoke last night to my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), who is the Conservative party chairman, and we are proceeding to select our candidate for this important election.

The reason I make that point is that I say this to the new mayor of South Yorkshire, whoever he or she may be: we understand the challenges South Yorkshire faces, we believe that an elected mayor can give South Yorkshire the leadership it clearly needs, and we will work with them, whoever they may be, to ensure that the nearly £1 billion of Government money that has been promised to South Yorkshire is delivered to the people of South Yorkshire.

It took my breath away when the leader of Sheffield City Council, Julie Dore, told me this summer that she never thought she would live to see the day in South Yorkshire when a Labour council—in fact, two Labour councils—egged on by local MPs, would reject £1 billion from a Tory Government because of factionalism and infighting in the Labour party in South Yorkshire.

**Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab):** I say to the Minister in good faith that he needs to be very careful about the tone of his comments. We have had a good-natured and constructive debate tonight about a very important subject, but the leaders of Barnsley and Doncaster have done what they have done because they genuinely believe it is in the best interests of the areas they represent.

**Jake Berry:** Well, I look forward in future debates to never hearing a whimper from the Labour Benches about supposed Government cuts. I have lived in South Yorkshire, and I know how deprived some of these areas are. People in Barnsley, Doncaster, Sheffield and Rotherham deserve the £1 billion the Government have brought forward for them.

**Dan Jarvis**

**Jake Berry:** I will not take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. All I can say is that the people who are trying to undermine this deal know exactly who they are, and it is shame on them, shame on them, shame on them.

**Dan Jarvis**

**Jake Berry:** I will not take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

Let me turn to devolution in the rest of Yorkshire. We welcome the discussions that have taken place over the summer, with talks having restarted after a significant period of stalemate. It is absolutely clear that there is no agreement around what has been referred to as the One Yorkshire deal. A report in Sheffield’s The Star yesterday confirmed that 11 of the 20 councils in Yorkshire support this proposal. York, Hambleton, Harrogate, Scarborough, North Yorkshire, Ryedale and Wakefield have said that they will not proceed with it. Although some elements of the media may choose to ignore that inconvenient truth, it is simply not the case that the coalition of the willing has had or does have wide support for its proposal.
As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear in his letter dated 15 September, he is happy to meet leaders to discuss a Greater Yorkshire deal, which could be an exciting and groundbreaking devolution deal, passing real power and real influence from the people in London back to the people of Greater Yorkshire. He has also confirmed that a Greater Yorkshire deal should not and cannot include any of the South Yorkshire boroughs. That is because to do so would undermine fundamentally the position of good faith that underpins both the Sheffield city region deal and all devolution deals that the Government seek to negotiate.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): If there were a desire from the northern Lincolnshire area to be involved in that process, would that be looked at by Ministers?

**Jake Berry**: Whoever is involved in the Greater Yorkshire deal, it is for Greater Yorkshire leaders to decide, perhaps with Lincolnshire, whether that should proceed.

In conclusion, if Yorkshire leaders come to Government with a widely supported, ground-up Greater Yorkshire deal involving—

**Dan Jarvis**: Will the Minister give way?

**Jake Berry**: I am sorry, I cannot because I do not have time.

If Yorkshire leaders come to Government with a widely supported, ground-up Greater Yorkshire deal involving a single mayoral combined authority that does not in any way undermine the Sheffield city region deal, we will welcome that. We stand ready. We will meet with people, including John Sentamu, because we believe that that deal, together with the South Yorkshire deal, has the potential to drive forward devolution in Yorkshire.

9.15 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).
House of Commons

Wednesday 11 October 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[BRETON IN THE CHAIR]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW SOUTHGATE CEMETERY BILL [LORDS]
Third Reading opposed and deferred until Tuesday 17 October (Standing Order No. 20).

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Devolved Administrations: Brexit

1. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps he has taken to engage with the devolved Administrations on the matter of the UK leaving the EU.

[900872]

14. Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps he has taken to engage with the devolved Administrations on the matter of the UK leaving the EU.

[900886]

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I met the Deputy First Minister of Scotland and the First Minister of Wales to initiate a full programme of engagement with their respective Administrations. Engagement continues at official level with the Northern Ireland civil service. I look forward to reviewing cross-departmental progress at the forthcoming Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations.

Chris Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer and I welcome the recent announcement of the new civil service hub in Cardiff, which will bring 4,000 civil service jobs from across Wales into one hub. Llandrindod Wells in my constituency was named this morning as the happiest place to live in Wales. Will my right hon. Friend give a commitment to continuing to see the whole of Wales as a target for future civil service collaboration?

Damian Green: I add my congratulations to the people of Llandrindod Wells on selecting an MP who will make them happy, too. My hon. Friend is quite right about the civil service hub in Cardiff. The UK Government have a significant footprint in Wales and the hub will deliver a range of benefits not just to people in Cardiff but across Wales, demonstrating the impact we can make through greater collaboration.

Mr Speaker: It has to be said that the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) always looks a very happy chappie and we are delighted to know it.

Chris Davies indicated assent.

Mrs Murray: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that once we leave the EU we will have total control over our internationally recognised fisheries limits, that fishermen from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England will benefit from any new management regime, and that this will not be bargained away during any negotiations?

Damian Green: I am happy to assure my hon. Friend that when we leave the EU we will be fully responsible under international law for controlling UK waters and the sustainable management of our fisheries. Through the negotiations we will of course work to achieve the best possible deal for the UK fishing industry as a whole.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the First Secretary of State please explain what consultation there was with the Welsh and Scottish Governments before the publication of UK Government papers on Brexit issues, including customs, Northern Ireland and research and development?

Damian Green: The position papers we have published over the past couple of months go to the devolved Administrations before they are published. As I said in my answer to the original question, we have regular consultation—indeed, later today I will be meeting the First Minister of Wales.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): We are told that the UK Government are preparing for a no-deal Brexit scenario. Will the First Secretary of State detail the preparations his Government have made for a scenario in which the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill fails to gain the legislative consent of the devolved Administrations?

Damian Green: The Government are, as the hon. Gentleman and the House would expect, preparing for all eventualities. That is the only responsible thing for a Government to do and that is what we are doing. The House will have a considerable amount of time during the Committee stage, which is coming up shortly, to debate the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I hope, partly through the re-institution of the Joint Ministerial Committee, to make sure that the legislative consent motion will be agreed.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given that there is no devolved Executive in Northern Ireland at present, how are views from Northern Ireland being fed into this process?

Damian Green: As I said in reply to the original question from my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), at the moment views from Northern Ireland are being fed in through the Northern Ireland civil service, which is currently doing administrative tasks. I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in hoping that we will soon have a Northern Ireland Executive back doing their job.
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): A lot of us are concerned about the shenanigans going on here and would prefer it if the Government gave a straightforward commitment to transferring relevant powers to the devolved Administrations instead of foytering around. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, when referring to UK-wide arrangements after Brexit, he is talking about co-decision between the UK Government and the devolved Governments—or does he mean that this Government will tell the others what to do?

Damian Green: No, the spirit and letter of the devolution settlement is that there are areas of responsibility for this Parliament and the Westminster Government, and areas of responsibility for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly. We have said that these have to be UK-wide frameworks. I think the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues in the Scottish Government accept that we do not want to break up the UK single market, but that there are responsibilities that will remain with Scotland.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): The Chancellor has written today that the Government must be prepared for every outcome from Brexit, but that he will not make resources available for a no-deal scenario. As well as managing the civil service, the Cabinet Office is responsible for co-ordinating Government policy. Whatever the Chancellor’s views, will the Minister now indicate that there is sufficient civil service resource currently working on the potentially disastrous no-deal Brexit scenario and its impact on the devolved Administrations?

Damian Green: I commend to the hon. Gentleman what the Chancellor actually said. I am happy to reassure the hon. Gentleman and the House that, yes, the Government are preparing for all eventualities, as any responsible Government would.

Jon Trickett: The truth is there is no contingency planning for a no-deal Brexit, and that explains the breakdown of policy co-ordination, for which the Minister is supposedly responsible, right at the heart of Government. The Government are a shambles and wholly divided. We have a Prime Minister who said that no deal was better than a bad deal, a Chancellor who now says he will not fund a no-deal scenario and a Foreign Secretary who seems perfectly happy with a no-deal arrangement. The stakes could not be higher, but the Government are a shambles. Is it not time they either get their act together—it is the Minister’s job to make sure that they do so—or stood aside and prepared the way for a Government who will act in the national interest?

Damian Green: I am happy again to assure the hon. Gentleman that the appropriate arrangements for all eventualities are being prepared, and of course the Government are working hard to make sure we get the best Brexit deal for this country—one that will ensure the future prosperity of this country for decades to come.

Electoral Registration

2. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the integrity of the electoral registration process. [900873]

3. Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the integrity of the electoral registration process. [900874]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): According to the Electoral Commission, the register used for June’s general election was the most accurate for years. The identity of applicants is verified by electoral registration officers using digital services provided by the Cabinet Office and the Department for Work and Pensions, and we have seen record levels of engagement. Recommendations in Sir Eric Pickles’ report have been accepted by the Government and will be used to improve the integrity of electoral processes further.

Eddie Hughes: Given concerns about students having the opportunity to vote twice, will my right hon. Friend consider joining me in supporting the private Member’s Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)?

Chris Skidmore: Although being registered at more than one address is perfectly legal, voting more than once at a general election is a crime that currently carries an unlimited financial penalty. The Government are reviewing a range of measures to prevent people from voting twice at general elections, and I also understand that the police are investigating allegations in several local authorities on this issue. I remind hon. Members that any evidence that individuals might have voted twice must be reported to the police.

Simon Hoare: I recognise the fines that my hon. Friend has drawn to the House’s attention, but is it not time to consider custodial sentences for election fraud?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. At the moment, there is an unlimited fine, but the Government are considering a range of other measures, including in relation to criminal proceedings, in order to move forwards.

11. [900882] John Spellar (Walsall) (Lab): Rather than focusing on the very few cases of fraud and the limited number of convictions—the same issue the Trump Administration have raised to discredit the democratic process—why does the Minister not worry about the millions who are not registered and consider using national insurance numbers and automatic registration in order to ensure both an accurate and a complete register?

Chris Skidmore: The Government are committed to ensuring individual voter registration. A complete register means nothing unless it is underpinned by accuracy, and we have the most accurate register. On electoral fraud, I make the point, as I have done repeatedly before, that it is the perception of fraud that is so corrosive to our democracy. The Electoral Commission’s report published today shows that 38% of people recognise that electoral fraud is an issue at general elections.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The integrity of the electoral register suffers while millions of British citizens are unregistered. What specific measures is the Minister taking to register the millions of young people who remain off the register, and what specific funds has he allocated to that worthy cause?
Chris Skidmore: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that at the last general election there were more people on the electoral register, and more people voting, than there have been since 1992. We should bear in mind the state of the Labour Government between 2001 and 2005, when there were far more people off the register. We are determined to have a democracy that works for everyone, and we are introducing a range of measures to that end. They include the publication of a democratic engagement strategy later this year, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will read.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Is the Minister aware of the massive change in Northern Ireland constituencies in terms of proxy votes between the 2015 general election and this year’s election, when thousands of people applied for and received proxy votes, which, in some constituencies, resulted in a virtual usurping of the election result? What plans has the Minister to address that?

Chris Skidmore: As the hon. Gentleman will know, electoral policy in Northern Ireland is dealt with by the Northern Ireland Office, but the Cabinet Office is working closely on how individual electoral registration can be introduced in Northern Ireland. I will refer the hon. Gentleman’s point to the Northern Ireland Office, but proof of identity has been required in polling stations in Northern Ireland since 1985, and the Labour Government introduced photo ID in 2003. Northern Ireland has led the way when it comes to ensuring that we can crack down on electoral fraud.

Electoral Fraud

4. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle electoral fraud.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): We are committed to providing a clear and secure democracy. Following our manifesto commitment, we are working with four local authorities to pilot voter ID in polling stations, and working with Tower Hamlets to pilot changes in postal voting in 2018, as part of a developing programme to strengthen electoral integrity.

Michael Tomlinson: I welcome the fact that the Government are piloting voter ID. I had the privilege of being in Iraqi Kurdistan for the recent independence referendum, when voter ID was used with apparently few difficulties. Which local authority areas are involved in the Government’s pilot, and how can the system be rolled out to further authorities in due course?

Damian Green: I am pleased to be able to confirm that the four local authorities that have agreed to take part in the voter ID pilot are Woking, Gosport, Bromley and Watford; and, as I have said, Tower Hamlets is involved in the postal vote pilot. We had an agreement with Slough as well, but at the last minute Labour councillors voted against joining the pilot, against the advice of their own officials. As we have heard this morning, the Labour party does not seem to take electoral fraud very seriously.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Is it not a fact that in 2015, when more than 50 million votes were cast, the number of convictions for electoral fraud was in the low double figures? Is not the truth that this is a Trojan horse, introducing voter suppression methods to enhance the electoral prospects of the Conservative party?

Damian Green: If the hon. Gentleman wants to be taken seriously on this issue, he should listen to the Electoral Commission, which in 2014 urged the Government to adopt the kind of measures that we are adopting now. He should also persuade Labour councillors, in Slough and elsewhere, to take it seriously. If Labour is seen as the party that is soft on electoral fraud, that will not be a very good look for Labour.

Government Procurement: SMEs

5. Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of Government procurement from small and medium-sized enterprises.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): We will shortly publish the latest small and medium-sized enterprises’ spending performance figures. The Government remain committed to a challenging target to ensure that a third of their procurement spending is with small businesses by 2022, and we are continuing to take action to achieve that.

Mary Glindon: Following a recent report by the Federation of Small Businesses, will the Minister tell the House whether he intends to issue guidance requiring local authorities to increase their use of dynamic purchasing systems so that small businesses are not locked out from lists of potential suppliers to those authorities?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady has always been a doughty champion of the spreading down of procurement practices to local government so that it, too, encourages more SMEs to take part in the process. We have issued guidance to local authorities on how local government can support SMEs, and have legislated to ban burdensome pre-qualification questionnaires for low-value contracts.

Lobbying

6. Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the lobbying of Government is carried out in a transparent and fair manner.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government are committed to transparency in lobbying. In 2014 we created a statutory register of consultant lobbyists to increase transparency among those seeking to lobby Ministers and permanent secretaries on behalf of third parties. That legislation complements the existing framework of industry-led regulation.

Ms Lee: The Minister has restricted trade unions and charities with regard to lobbying; can he tell us when he will properly regulate big business lobbying to Government?

Chris Skidmore: The Government are of the view that the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014...
increased transparency around the work of consultants and lobbyists and therefore we will not be undertaking any future review. The Act confers powers on the register of lobbyists to remove an organisation from the register if that organisation seeks to undertake any work in future.

Voting Age

7. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of reducing the voting age to 16.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government have stated in their manifesto a clear commitment to maintain the voting age of 18, so the Government have no plans to lower the voting age in elections.

Gerald Jones: The Labour Welsh Government are currently making provision in Wales for 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in local and Welsh Government elections. Will the Minister urge his Government and other Conservative Members to support the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) on 3 November, to prove that this Government do not disregard the views of young people?

Chris Skidmore: As the hon. Gentleman has made clear, this Government have given powers to the devolved Assemblies to make decisions in respect of their local government and regional elections, but the position of the Government remains clear: on the parliamentary franchise, the age will remain at 18. Of course, I look forward to the many contributions that will be made in the debate on that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The voting age is one thing, but has my hon. Friend given any consideration to the issue of education in schools around electoral fraud—for example, double voting?

Chris Skidmore: The Government are of course determined to engage the many young people in schools in the democratic processes. Recently I established a national democracy week, in which I hope all Members will take part. It is vital for democratic participation that we encourage young people to get involved as early as possible, and to be educated in our democratic processes.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that sometimes young people make mistakes, and that it cannot be right that a teenager at the age of 16 can make the mistake of joining the Conservative party and voting in the inevitably upcoming leadership election, yet would be denied a vote at the forthcoming general election?

Chris Skidmore: We have had many debates on the franchise, and I have sat as a Back Bencher through several debates in my parliamentary career so far: I think Parliament has voted three times on the issue and has consistently decided not to introduce votes at 16. We will be having future debates, and I look forward to engaging with the hon. Lady in them in due course.

Relocation of Government Functions


12. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What plans he has to relocate civil service jobs to cities, towns and regions outside London.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): The Government’s industrial strategy will help to create a more balanced economy by moving arm’s length public bodies out of London and the surrounding areas, and into clusters in the regions and devolved nations of the UK. Our hubs programme is also expected to save £1.78 billion over 20 years, as well as providing state of the art buildings from which civil servants can deliver world-class services to our citizens.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am delighted at the announcement of 6,000 more jobs at a Government hub in Leeds, but does the Minister agree that infrastructure spending is also critical to delivering greater prosperity for the north?

Caroline Nokes: The Leeds hub will be a catalyst for growth in the surrounding region. We continue to do more to connect our communities and drive productivity. The Chancellor recently announced a further £300 million investment for HS2 and £100 million for the road network—significant investments for the northern powerhouse. That will be crucial for driving growth and regeneration in the north and midlands.

Kevin Foster: Torbay has not only beautiful beaches, but direct rail connections to London, Manchester and Birmingham, improved road links, and sites ready for regeneration. Which of the plans the Minister listed does she believe present the greatest opportunity for relocating jobs to Torbay?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend has, as ever, emphasised the stunning attributes of his constituency. Our commitment to the public bodies relocation programme seeks to move significant numbers of public servants out of London. I assure my hon. Friend that I have heard his advertisement for the English riviera and the potential it certainly brings.

Topical Questions

T1. [900937] James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): This month we celebrate the first year of our world-leading national cyber security strategy. A major milestone has been successfully establishing the National Cyber Security Centre. [ Interruption. ] It has shown that it plays a vital role in providing cyber security to keep our country safe. The NCSC responded to 590 significant incidents, more than 30 of which were sufficiently serious to require a cross-government response. Our five-year national cyber strategy is working to defend our people, businesses and assets, deter our adversaries, and develop the skills and capabilities we need. [ Interruption. ]
Mr Speaker: Order. There is a very large number of intense private conversations taking place in the Chamber, but the voice of Braintree must be heard. I call Mr James Cleverly.

James Cleverly: The vast majority of private sector employment in my constituency of Braintree is in small to medium-sized enterprises. What steps are the Government taking to make it easier for SMEs to bid for and successfully win Government contracts?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is completely right about the importance of SMEs, which is why we have taken a number of steps to enable them to access Government contracts more easily, including by putting in place the Contracts Finder website and a requirement for all public sector buyers to have 30-day payment terms in their contracts.

T2. [900938] Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Yesterday’s race audit made clear the barriers that exist to black people and other ethnic minority groups in our society today. We all want to see those barriers broken down. Can the Minister explain why, in the civil service fast stream recruitment process for which his office is responsible, black men and women represent one in 20 of the total applicants but only one in 100 of those offered a job? When is he going to put his own house in order?

Damian Green: That is a perfectly reasonable challenge, and the hon. Gentleman asked about that when I made my statement yesterday. One area where we absolutely need to do better is inside the civil service, and specifically in fast stream recruitment, and we will certainly do that.

T3. [900939] Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): What assessments have the Government made of the east midlands, and specifically Leicestershire, as a place to relocate Government services outside of London?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): We will ensure that Government functions are increasingly spread throughout the UK and not just in the capital. The Government are reviewing the location of all arm’s length bodies to help to drive growth across the nation, and we will ensure that the east midlands is fully considered as a possible location.

T4. [900940] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Next week, the Government’s consultation on the contaminated blood scandal will close. As the Department of Health is an implicated party, many people are refusing to take part in the consultation. Will the Cabinet Office now take immediate control of the consultation, because otherwise the rules of natural justice will be offended?

Damian Green: I am aware that the hon. Lady—[Interruption.]

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T5. [900941] Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I, too, am delighted to hear it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the race disparity audit provides invaluable data to not only the Government, but charities, in focusing their resources for maximum impact?

Damian Green: I agree that it is an extremely important development. It is a world first to provide this amount of information in that form. It is true that it holds a mirror up to the whole of society, and not just central or indeed local government and public bodies, but all other bodies, including charities, will need to respond positively to some of the disturbing findings exposed in the race disparity audit.

T6. [900942] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): The recent Public Accounts Committee report on cyber-security emphasised the considerable skills gap that the Government and wider society face in tackling the issue. Is it still the case that there is no minimum standard of competence for civil servants entrusted with a cyber-security role? What steps are the Government taking to increase the number of suitably qualified experts?

Caroline Nokes: We are working hard with the National Cyber Security Centre to improve competency not only within the civil service and across Government, but among our young people. Our CyberFirst programme, which I visited in Portsmouth this summer, shows that there is a massive range of really enthusiastic young people who are determined to learn the skills that they will need to help us.

T7. [900943] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The young people with whom I engage in schools are increasingly aware of the world around them. They are economically and socially liberal, and they do not expect the state to pay for everything because they will have the longest repayment terms if it does. Given the Conservative party’s proud record on extending the franchise, I again ask the Minister to consider votes for 16 and 17-year-olds.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I am afraid that my hon. Friend and I will have to agree to disagree on that point. The Government’s position remains as it was in our manifesto: the franchise will be retained at 18. However, I am sure that my hon. Friend will want to participate in future debates on this issue through private Members’ Bills on Fridays.
**PRIME MINISTER**

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

**Engagements**

Q1. [900922] Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 11 October.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Ian Mearns: The Prime Minister will know that yesterday was World Mental Health Day. Mental health problems affect one in four people, but only £1 out of every £8 in clinical commissioning group budgets is spent on mental health services. Newcastle Gateshead CCG is set to cut its budget by a further 1.1% next year, bringing the total spend for mental health to less than 10% of its entire budget. If parity of esteem for mental health is to be achieved, the Government will have to match their words with more strong and stable, ring-fenced funding. With those cuts and with increasing demand, when will the Prime Minister end the talking and promise to increase and ring fence funding for mental health and specialist psychological services?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance that we should attach to mental health. Giving that parity of esteem is an important step that this Government have taken, but we are also doing much more on mental health. In fact, more money overall is going into mental health. More people are able to access NHS talking therapies and receive treatment for their mental ill health, but we also need to look at the issue more widely. That is precisely why I have set up a scheme to train staff in schools to ensure better awareness of mental health problems and to enable them to know how to deal with individuals in schools who are suffering from mental health problems. There is more for us to do, but this Government are putting more money in and are taking more action on mental health than any previous Government.

Q2. [900923] Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Prime Minister will know that financial and professional services are the UK’s largest source of tax revenue and our largest driver of trade surpluses. Yesterday I met representatives of that sector, who wanted me to pass on to the Prime Minister their warm support for the pragmatic, sensible arrangement that she has made to ensure the critical legal and contractual continuity that the sector needs as we leave the European Union. As well as recognising that, will she perhaps build on that positive approach by considering issuing a White Paper on our future vision for trade in services, as we have done for other sectors?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. He is right that we need to build a bridge from our existing partnership to our future partnership to allow time for practical adjustments to be made. That is exactly what we are doing when we talk about the implementation period, which I set out in my speech in Florence, together with our vision for our future partnership. I am sure that my hon. Friend will know that we published a White Paper on our future trade policy earlier this week, and we will continue to publish papers in the coming months.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I hope that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the late Rodney Bickerstaffe, the former general secretary of Unison who died last week. He will be remembered for his warmth and the esteem in which he was held throughout the Labour movement and throughout the community. More than that, he, almost more than anyone else, made sure that the national minimum wage happened in this country. Millions of workers are better off due to the great work that Rodney did during his life. Can we say, “Thank you, Rodney, for everything you did in your life”?

The roll-out of universal credit is already causing debt, poverty and homelessness. Does the Prime Minister accept that it would be irresponsible to press on regardless?

The Prime Minister: Of course we offer our condolences to Rodney Bickerstaffe’s friends and family on his death. He and I would probably never have agreed on very much in politics, but obviously he played his role with commitment and dedication through his life.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about universal credit. It is perhaps worth our recognising why we brought in universal credit in the first place. What we want is a welfare system that provides a safety net for those who need it, and that helps people to get into the workplace, earn more and provide for their families. The system that we inherited from Labour did not do that. It was far too complicated, there were far too many different sorts of payment and, crucially, too many of those who earned more found themselves with less money in their pockets. Under Labour, too many people were better off on benefits. That is not the system that we want. We want universal credit, which is simpler and more straightforward, and makes sure that work always pays.

Jeremy Corbyn: I wonder which planet the Prime Minister is on. Citizens Advice describes universal credit as “a disaster waiting to happen”. It has made that conclusion based on its work assisting tens of thousands of claimants with debt. Housing associations report an increase of up to 50% in the eviction of tenants in rent arrears due to universal credit. Can the Prime Minister and Department for Work and Pensions not wake up to reality and halt this process?

The Prime Minister: As I have explained, we have very good reasons for changing the system. Yes, the DWP has been—[Interruption.] We have been listening to concerns raised about the way in which universal credit has operated. Changes have been made; performance has improved, for example. At the beginning of this year, only 55% of people were getting their first payment on time. Now that is more than 80%. Of course there is more for us to do, and that is why the Secretary of State and the Department for Work and Pensions continue to monitor this and to ensure that performance improves. Underlying this is a need to ensure that we have a system that ensures that work pays and that people are not better off on benefits.
Jeremy Corbyn: The Halton Housing Trust reports a 100% year-on-year increase in the number of evictions. Half of all council tenants on universal credit are at least a month in arrears in their rent. This weekend, the former Prime Minister, Sir John Major, described universal credit as “operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving.”

He is right, isn’t he? It is years behind schedule. It is forcing people to food banks, driving up evictions and leaving families in debt. Can the Prime Minister not see it? If the former Prime Minister can understand it, why can’t this one?

Jeremy Corbyn: At last the Prime Minister recognises that there are problems. The Institute for Public Policy Research and the Child Poverty Action Group estimate that universal credit is going to put another 200,000 children into poverty. Last month, apparently, a dozen Conservative MPs wrote to the Work and Pensions Secretary calling for a pause. Perhaps they should have listened to people like Georgina, who contacted me this week.

"All summer we were left with no money to survive as it just stopped abruptly. We would have lost everything if it weren’t for my family.”

Others cannot rely on family and are facing eviction. I urge the Prime Minister: show some leadership, pause universal credit, and stop driving up poverty, debt and homelessness, because that is what this does.

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The Prime Minister: In fact, research shows that after four months the number of people on universal credit in rent arrears had fallen by a third. As I said in my previous answer to the right hon. Gentleman, of course we recognise that there have been some issues to address in the rolling out of this benefit, and that is why we have been taking our time doing it. The underlying reason for moving to universal credit is still the right one. We see more people getting into work on universal credit than on jobseeker’s allowance, and there is the possibility for those people who cannot wait for their first payment to ask for an advance if they are in need, and the number of people getting an advance has increased.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are becoming very overexcited. The Prime Minister’s response must be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: The last Labour Government lifted a million children out of poverty. Gloucester City Homes has evicted one in eight of all of its tenants because of universal credit. The Prime Minister talks about helping the poorest, but the reality is a very, very different story. Not only are people being driven into poverty but, absurdly, the universal credit helpline costs claimants 55p per minute for the privilege of trying to get someone to help them claim what they believe they are entitled to. Will the Prime Minister today show some humanity, intervene and make at least the helpline free?

The Prime Minister: I have made it very clear that we continue to look at how we are dealing with this and ensuring that we get this system out in a way that is actually working for people. The performance is increasing, and it is working because more people are getting into work on universal credit than were doing so on jobseeker’s allowance. [Interruption.] I do want people to be able to find work. I want people to be able to get better jobs, to earn more and to get on without Government support. That is why it is so important that we help businesses to create jobs. Perhaps when the right hon. Gentleman stands up he would like to welcome the fact that 3 million more jobs have been created due to a strong economy under a Conservative Government.

The Prime Minister: First, may I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I would be happy to look at the case of Georgina if he would like to send me those details?

As I have just said—once again, I referred to this in my previous answer, had the right hon. Gentleman listened to it—it is possible for those who are in need to get advance payments. The number of those getting advance payments has increased from 35% to just over 50%—the majority. So we are seeing the system being improved and performance improving. But let us just think about the labour party’s record on this whole issue of welfare. Under the Labour party, 1.4 million people spent most of the last decade trapped on out-of-work benefits. Under the Labour party, the number of households where no—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister’s response must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Under the Labour Government, the number of households in which no member had ever worked nearly doubled. The welfare bill went up by 60% in real terms, which cost every household an extra £3,000 a year. That is not the way to run a system; that is the way to have a system that is failing ordinary working people.

The Prime Minister: Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman what the record of this Government is: the deficit is down by more than two thirds; 3 million more people are in jobs; 1.8 million more children are in good or outstanding schools; more people are visiting A&E; more people are getting operations than ever before; there are record levels of funding into the NHS; and there are record levels of funding into our schools. What did we see about the Labour party from its conference? [Interruption.] Wait for it.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are becoming very overexcited. The Prime Minister’s response will be heard.

The Prime Minister: What did we hear from Labour’s conference? What happened at Labour’s conference? First, Shelter said that the Labour party’s housing policy would end up harming people on low incomes; Labour’s flagship Haringey Council rejected another of Labour’s policies; the Equality and Human Rights Commission said that Labour “needs to...establish that it is not a racist party”;
and the Labour leader of Brighton Council threatened to ban Labour conferences because of freely expressed anti-Semitism. That was all before the shadow Chancellor admitted that a Labour Government would bring a run on the pound and ordinary working people would pay the price.

**Hon. Members:** “More!”

Q3. [900924] Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I fear that that “more” was not for me. I am afraid I must return to the subject of universal credit, but perhaps the difference between Government Members and Opposition Members is that we believe in universal credit’s transformative properties and want it to work. And work it will, but we have to get it right. I thank the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for promising on Monday to advertise more widely that advances are available to claimants, but many of us on the Government Benches feel that more people taking up those advances must surely mean that the in-built six-week wait just does not work. Will the Prime Minister please consider meeting me so that I can explain to her why, if we reduce that six-week wait, we will do a better job of supporting those just about managing families who are struggling to make ends meet and who have no savings to cover them over that period?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes the important point about the fundamental benefits of universal credit, but she is of course right, and that is why the DWP is continuing to look at the performance of universal credit and how it is operating. I am happy to meet her to look into the issue. She mentioned the advance payments; as she said, it is important that those who need those payments are aware of them, so it is about not only advertising but making sure that jobcentre staff are trained and are being retrained to ensure that they are aware of what they can do to help people. The advance payments can be with people within five days or, in an emergency, on the very same day. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): If there was another European Union referendum now, I know that I would vote to remain. Why has the Prime Minister not been straightforward about how she would vote?

**The Prime Minister:** There is no second referendum. The people of the United Kingdom voted and we will be leaving the European Union in March 2019.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister cannot answer a simple question. [Interruption.] I am quite happy to wait. The reason why the Prime Minister cannot answer a simple question is that she is hamstrung by the parliamentary majority and a divided party of right-wing Brexiteers. This morning—[Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Kerr, we are not having any pranksters here.

Ian Blackford: This morning, Chancellor Philip Hammond admitted that a cloud of uncertainty hangs over the UK economy. The Scottish National party is the only party in this House that is united on the issue. We know that crashing out of the single market and the customs union will cost 80,000 jobs in Scotland and £2,000 per person. Now is the time for leadership. Will the Prime Minister come off the fence and recognise that, if we are to save this economy, we need to stay in the single market and the customs union?

**The Prime Minister:** Now is the time for the SNP leadership to accept that, to save jobs in Scotland, it needs Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Q7. [900928] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Following yesterday’s announcement of almost 2,000 job losses at BAE Systems, many hundreds of which are in my constituency where very dedicated and highly skilled people work, can the Prime Minister assure me that she and her Government will continue to do everything they can to support export orders to Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well as supporting those dedicated workers in finding alternative employment and the wider Lancashire economy?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is obviously a very worrying time for workers at BAE Systems, including those at Warton in his constituency. He raises two issues. I can reassure him that the Department for Work and Pensions will ensure that people have all the support they need to look for new jobs. That will include the rapid response service, which will help with CVs, training and information about benefits. We will also continue to promote our world-leading defence industry right across the globe, so that companies like BAE Systems can secure contracts for UK-made equipment. Just last month, my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary signed a statement of intent with Qatar, committing the country to the purchase of 24 Typhoons and six Hawks from BAE. We will continue to promote these first-class products from first-class manufacturers such as those in my hon. Friend’s constituency. We will also ensure that support is given to those who lose their jobs.

Q4. [900925] Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Prime Minister, last week you announced that you would fund 25,000 extra socially rented homes over five years. The waiting list in Brighton is already that. Along with Brighton, my other local authority, Lewes District Council, is wanting to build more council houses, but your policies will not help them, because they are limited not by the open market, but by the Government’s arbitrary cap on borrowing and financing against housing stock. Will the Prime Minister agree with me, the Conservative-led Lewes District Council and the Labour-led Brighton that the cap on the housing revenue account must be lifted to get councils building for Britain again?

**Mr Speaker:** I just point out to the hon. Gentleman that I have made no announcement and have no policy on this matter.

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman is referring to our announcement that we are putting £2 billion extra into our successful affordable housing programme, bringing the amount dedicated entirely to creating affordable homes to more than £9 billion. For every pound the Government put in, housing associations raise a further £6, which means that thousands more families get the
homes that they need and can afford every single year over the next five years. This is a good announcement from the Government. It means that more people will get the homes that they need. I would have expected him to welcome it.

Q13. [900934] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): In my constituency of Monmouth, children as young as 12 have been labelled as transgender and prescribed potentially life-altering sex change drugs. Does the Prime Minister agree that the law needs to be tightened to prevent this potential mistreatment of vulnerable young people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very sensitive issue. As he will be aware, health is a devolved matter in Wales. The NHS in England has strict guidelines regarding the prescriptions of these sorts of medications to young people. They can be prescribed only with the agreement of a specialist team after a careful assessment of the individual, and generally only to patients who are 15 or older. I recognise the concern raised by my hon. Friend.

Q5. [900926] Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): In her radio interview yesterday, the Prime Minister was pressed three times on the position of EU nationals in the UK in the event of no deal. She was unable to answer, suggesting that this was a “technical” issue. But people do not live technical lives. Their lives involve relationships, jobs and their children’s schools. With the clock ticking and the possibility of a no-deal Brexit looming nearer, will she reassure my 10,000 plus constituents who are EU residents exactly what their rights will be if there is no deal?

The Prime Minister: First, let me re-emphasise—I have said this before in this House—that we value the contribution that EU citizens have made in this country and we want them to stay. That is why we made citizens’ rights one of the key issues, and one of the early issues that is being discussed in the negotiations that are currently taking place. We are working to ensure that we get a good deal. If there is no deal, we will obviously have to have arrangements with other member states regarding not just EU citizens here, but UK citizens in those member states. But we are working for the best deal for the United Kingdom. We are very close to agreement on citizens’ rights. We want EU citizens to stay here in the UK because we value the contribution they are making.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): On Monday, my right hon. Friend was clear about her negotiations, saying that it remains the Government’s priority to get a very good free trade arrangement with our European friends and partners before we leave. She also made it clear that, alongside that, we would make plans and all necessary arrangements to depart under World Trade Organisation terms should no such agreement be available. Will she confirm, then, that all money necessary will be allocated to this project as and when required?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give my right hon. Friend that confirmation. We are preparing for every eventuality. We are committing money to prepare for Brexit, including a no-deal scenario. It might be helpful if I update the House. The Treasury has committed over £250 million of new money to Departments such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Home Office, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Department for Transport in this financial year for Brexit preparations. In some cases, Departments will need to spend money before the relevant legislation has gone through the House. The Treasury will write to Departments and to the Public Accounts Committee explaining this process shortly. Where money needs to be spent, it will be spent.

Q6. [900927] Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent, Mr Geoffrey Ellwell, was transitioned from disability living allowance to personal independence payment in October 2016. He previously had the higher rate mobility and the standard rate for care. His PIP assessment gave him zero points. He appealed that decision in January 2017. Six months later, on 21 June, he passed away without his appeal being heard. The appeal that took place two days after his death posthumously awarded him the higher rate for both elements, backdated to January. What message would the Prime Minister like me to take back to Geoffrey’s partner, Carol, about the way in which this Government treated Geoffrey when he most needed help, compassion and support?

The Prime Minister: The message that I would like the hon. Gentleman to take back to his constituent’s partner is that we offer our condolences at the death of her partner. We are working to ensure that there is greater consistency in the judgments that are originally given on PIP assessments. We introduced PIP in order to ensure that we are able to focus payments on the most vulnerable. I completely understand how she feels about the position she is in. We offer her our deepest condolences.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): HS2 Ltd continues to fail my constituents living along the line of route for HS2, with some being offered tens of thousands of pounds less than the true value of their homes. Will the Prime Minister now personally intervene to ensure that my residents living in the affected areas of Erewash do not lose out as a result of this major national infrastructure project?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important point, and it is right that she is speaking up on behalf of her constituents. I know that the Department for Transport is looking carefully at these issues and that my hon. Friend the rail Minister is determined to see that fair and comprehensive compensation for those directly affected by the route is paid, and it will be paid as if HS2 did not exist, plus the 10% and reasonable moving costs. We are committed, as ever, to infrastructure investment—we are investing in infrastructure—but it is important with a major infrastructure change such as HS2 that we do ensure that those compensation payments for people are being paid properly. As I say, my hon. Friend the rail Minister is focusing on this issue.

Q8. [900929] Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): This week, the public have witnessed the most extraordinary spectacle: the Prime Minister ramping up the no-deal rhetoric on Brexit and backtracking on
her commitment to stay in the single market and customs union for transition, all because she is afraid of the most right-wing, rabid elements in her own party. When prices are going up in our shops, when the country’s credit rating has been cut and when businesses are actively considering moving jobs overseas, do the British people not deserve better than a Prime Minister simply running scared?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady could not be more wrong. First of all, we are not ramping up a no-deal scenario; we are actively working in negotiations with the European Union to ensure that we get a good deal—the right deal for Britain—for a brighter future for this country, which is what I believe we can and will achieve. It is what I set out in my Florence speech. I recommend the speech to the hon. Lady.

On the second point, I made very clear—perhaps I need just to explain it again to members of the Opposition—that when we leave the European Union in March 2019, we will cease to be full members of the single market and the customs union. That will happen because you cannot be full members of the single market and the customs union without accepting all four pillars—free movement; continued, in perpetuity, European Court of Justice jurisdiction. During the implementation period, we will be looking to get an agreement that we can operate on much the same basis as we operate at the moment—under the same rules and regulations—but that will not be the same as full membership of the customs union and the single market.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Royal Marines, supported by a specialist amphibious fleet, have served our country with great distinction for many, many years? Does she share my concern that one of the proposals currently being considered by the Royal Navy is to downsize the amphibious fleet? In an uncertain world, is this not both short-sighted and dangerous, and will she please intervene?

The Prime Minister: First, I absolutely agree that we can commend and applaud the contribution that the Royal Marines and our amphibious fleet have made to the defence of this country and, indeed, the defence of others. It is absolutely right that, as we look at how threats are changing, we look at how we should best spend the rising defence budget to support our national security. We have committed to spending 2% of GDP on defence every year of this Parliament. We are spending £178 billion between 2016 and 2026 on equipment for our armed forces. Naturally, we do not always discuss the specific operational details, but if I might just say to my hon. Friend, I understand that the claims he has referred to are pure speculation at this stage.

Q9. [900930] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In the past 18 months, two students from St Brendan’s Sixth Form College in my constituency, Izzy Gentry and George Zographou, tragically died from meningitis B, and only this week we heard reports of the death from suspected meningitis of another Bristol pupil, from Orchard School. The free vaccinations for babies, introduced two years ago, are of course very welcome, but they came far too late to save Izzy and George, so will the Prime Minister do more to raise awareness of meningitis and extend free vaccinations to today’s teenagers, which is the group, after babies, that is most at risk?

The Prime Minister: First, of course we send our deep condolences to the families and friends of all those students in the hon. Lady’s constituency who have died as a result of contracting meningitis. The point she raises about raising awareness of meningitis is a very valuable one, and it is something that we do need to continue to do. Very often, when decisions are taken by the Government, such as on the vaccination that is already in place, it is very easy to think that that is a job done, but, actually, we need to continue to look at see how we can ensure that we do not see these deaths from meningitis in the future.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I was shocked the other week to hear the shadow Chancellor predicting a run on the pound if Labour took office. For my constituents that would mean an increase in their household bills and in the cost of their weekly shopping. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the biggest risk to this country would be letting the shadow Chancellor into No. 11 Downing Street?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree; my hon. Friend is right that a run on the pound would mean higher prices and that it would make life much more difficult. It would mean job losses, businesses leaving the country and people being poorer. The one thing that we absolutely must do is ensure that the shadow Chancellor gets nowhere near the Treasury. The Leader of the Opposition asked me earlier what planet I was on. Well, we all know what planet he and his shadow Chancellor are on: Planet Venezuela.

Q10. [900931] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Is it the Prime Minister’s intention that the United Kingdom should remain part of the common fisheries policy during any transitional period after we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: When we leave the European Union, we will be leaving the common fisheries policy. As part of the agreement that we need to enter into for the implementation period, obviously that and other issues will be part of that agreement. But when we leave the European Union, we will leave the common fisheries policy.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It has been assumed that triggering article 50 means that on 29 March 2019 we will come out of the EU if there is no agreement, but is it not the case that the negotiations can be extended if the Government and the EU agree to do that? Will the Prime Minister assure the House that under no circumstances will the negotiations be extended?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is accurate in his interpretation of the treaty, which does allow for an extension of negotiations. I have been very clear that by March 2019 we want not only for those negotiations to have ended but to have an agreement on the future relationship and on our withdrawal, and we will leave the EU in March 2019.
Q11. [900932] Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware that last month Jaguar Land Rover announced that it was ending its contract early, putting 640 jobs at risk. She has scrapped rail electrification and is flip-flopping on delivering the tidal lagoon, so will she now step up, work with the Welsh Government, Ford and the trade unions, help to save the jobs, and help to ensure a positive future for the south Wales economy?

The Prime Minister: Of course we want to work to see a positive future for the south Wales economy. That is what the United Kingdom Government are doing across the whole United Kingdom: working for that brighter and more positive future. With regard to the tidal lagoon, we will publish our response to the Hendry review in due course.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I recently visited the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, which was truly harrowing. It can only be described as a humanitarian disaster. I am immensely proud of the work that the United Kingdom Government are doing through UK aid, but what pressure can my right hon. Friend put on the Myanmar Government to end the persecution, so that the Rohingya people can go home?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We remain deeply concerned by what is happening to the Rohingya. We know that there are now over 500,000 refugees in Bangladesh. It is a major humanitarian crisis. We have been providing support through our international development aid, and we have provided money to the Red Cross in Burma and bilateral donations to support the refugees who have crossed into Bangladesh. We have raised the matter three times at the UN Security Council. The international community has delivered a clear message that the Burmese authorities must stop the violence, allow the safe return of refugees and allow full humanitarian access. We have also suspended any practical defence engagement that we had with Burma because of our concerns.

Q12. [900933] Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I make no apologies for the fact that my question is similar to that asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). Layla-Rose Ermenekli, from Oldham, was just six years old when she contracted meningitis and later died in hospital. There were failings by the Royal Oldham Hospital, which did not spot important signs of meningitis, and those failings will be addressed. But, fundamentally, Layla would be alive today if she had received the MenB vaccination. Will the Prime Minister meet Layla’s parents, Ricky and Kirsty, and campaigners to discuss expanding the meningitis B vaccination programme to cover all children?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman again raises a very serious case, and our condolences go to the family of his constituent. This is an issue on which, as I have said, we need to raise awareness. He raises the question of the response by medical professionals. This is not just about individuals—about parents—recognising the symptoms, but about ensuring that healthcare professionals are identifying them. I will ask the Health Secretary to meet the hon. Gentleman and people who are anxious about this to hear directly from them their concerns regarding vaccinations.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): On Monday, at the start of Baby Loss Awareness Week, this Conservative Government launched 11 pilot projects for a national bereavement care pathway. This groundbreaking pathway will look at support for parents who have lost a child from conception to the age of one. May I ask the Prime Minister to congratulate the parents, the charities and the health professionals who have worked so hard to develop this project, and to make sure that it is rolled out more widely once the lessons from the pilots have been learned?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating all who have worked so hard on this issue, which, sadly, brings such distress to too many people—including, I know, Members of this House. I am sure that everybody will want to join me in marking Baby Loss Awareness Week. There was a debate on the matter yesterday, and I pay tribute to Members from across the House who spoke very movingly about their own experiences.

I am happy to welcome, as my hon. Friend has done, the pilot of the national bereavement care pathway this week. The Department of Health is also providing funding to Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, to work with other baby loss charities and royal colleges to improve the quality of bereavement care in the NHS. We expect the pathway to be rolled out nationally in October 2018. As my hon. Friend says, it is important to conduct a pilot, so that we can learn from it as we come to the national roll-out.

Q14. [900935] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): A woman came to my office fleeing domestic violence. We rang round every women’s refuge in London, but we were unable to find her a place because of Government budget cuts. What advice would the Prime Minister give to my constituent?

The Prime Minister: I fully understand the hon. Lady’s concern about her constituent, who is fleeing domestic violence. We do not want anybody in this country to be subjected to domestic violence and abuse. That is why the Government have actually been putting more money into supporting refugees across the country. It is why we have ring-fenced money for domestic violence support across the country, and it is why we have introduced new legislation. But we are also going to look at what more we can do, through a domestic violence Act, to provide the support that is necessary to ensure that we deal with the perpetrators, support survivors and, as all of us across the House should want to do, end domestic violence.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for her pledge to build hundreds of new free schools? Does she agree that they are critical to drive up standards and increase parental choice, and is it not true that we are committed to creating a school system that works for everyone, while the Opposition want to hold everyone back?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Free schools have performed a very important function in raising standards in education in this country,
and I am pleased that we have so many more children now in good or outstanding schools. Free schools have done something else as well, as I see in my own constituency, where one of the free schools is specifically for children who are on the autistic spectrum. That is very important, and it is a service that was not available previously. Free schools have enabled that to happen. They are providing for people up and down the country, and we should welcome them.

Q15. [900936] Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Vascular services in my constituency are to be moved to an as yet untested centre, while in Bangor we already have a facility with an international reputation. Does the Prime Minister share my concern that, due to bungling over health by the Labour Government in Cardiff, seriously ill Welsh patients will have to travel further and even, like the late Irfon Williams, have to move to live in England just to access proper treatment?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I am obviously not aware of the details of the particular services and of the transfer that he has referred to, but the overall point he makes is that people living in Wales are often seeing that they are getting a less good service from the Labour Government NHS in Wales—[Interruption.] Oh, yes. Yes, this is the case. As the hon. Gentleman says, there are people who will travel from Wales to England to get the service that is available in the NHS in England, and the Labour Government in Wales need to take a hard look at what they are doing to the NHS in Wales.
Higher Education Funding

12.46 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if she will make a statement on higher education funding.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): On 9 October, I made a written ministerial statement to the House setting out changes to the repayment threshold for student loans from April 2018 and confirming the maximum tuition fees for the 2018-19 academic year. The Government’s reforms to higher education funding since 2012 have delivered a 25% increase in university funding per student per degree. University funding per student is today at the highest level it has been at any time in the past 30 years.

As the House is aware, the Government have decided to maintain tuition fees at their current level for the 2018-19 academic year. This means that the maximum level of tuition fees will be £9,250 for the next academic year, 2018-19, which is about £300 less than if the maximum fee had been uprated in line with inflation.

We will also increase the repayment threshold for student loans from its current level of £21,000 to £25,000 for the 2018-19 financial year. Thereafter, we will adjust it annually in line with average earnings. This change applies to those who have taken out or will take out loans for full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in the post-2012 system. It also applies to those who have taken out or will take out an advanced learner loan for a further education course. Increasing the repayment threshold will put more money in the pockets of graduates by lowering their monthly repayments. They will benefit by up to £360 in the 2018-19 financial year. The overall lifetime benefit is greatest for graduates on middle incomes; low earners of course continue to be exempt from repayments.

We have world-class universities, accessed by a record number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and a progressive funding system. We are building on those strengths through our planned reforms, including the reforming technical education to provide new routes to skilled employment and strengthening how we hold universities to account for the teaching and outcomes they deliver through the teaching excellence framework.

The changes we are making are considered proposals that reinforce the principles of our student loan system and ensure that costs continue to be split fairly between graduates and the taxpayer. However, we recognise that there is more to do. We have further work under way to offer more choice to students and ensure they get value for money. We want more competition and innovation, including through many two-year courses. As the Prime Minister made clear last week, we will continue to keep the system under careful review to ensure it remains fair and effective. The Government will set out further steps on higher education student financing in due course.

Angela Rayner: Let me welcome Members back from conference season. We sang “The Red Flag”: the Conservatives waved the white flag. I told our conference that the Government should get on with sorting out student finance. Then the Prime Minister told her conference that they would. I suppose I am cheaper than Lynton Crosby, but the Government’s announcement begs just a few questions: what, who, when, why, how and how much? Apart from that, it is completely clear. What are the details of the review of higher education funding that the Prime Minister promised? Who will sit on it? When will it start and finish? Who decided that policy, how and when? Is it true that the Minister was unaware until the Prime Minister announced it? Surely he cannot be the least favoured Minister in the Johnson household.

Can the Minister tell us how much these policy changes will cost? How much more will taxpayers contribute and how much interest receivable is lost? Will the reduced income be replaced by additional funding? Can the Government explain why they have changed their mind since we last asked for these measures to be taken and they refused? Are they still considering capping interest rates below the 6% some graduates are being charged? What is their policy on grants? “Senior sources” have briefed that the Education Secretary wants them back. Will the Minister now match our commitment to restore maintenance support?

Just what is the Government’s policy on tuition fees? They boast about freezing fees for one year, but we all know that that is simply because they do not have a majority in this House for any rise, so what will they do after that? Will they finally accept that this House voted against their most recent rise, and revoke that too?

The Prime Minister said that the Government have listened and learned. Will they listen to this House, and when will they learn that actions mean more than words?

Joseph Johnson: I will answer some of the hon. Lady’s questions—in fact, all the questions. The normal, cross-Government processes were followed in the run-up to the announcements. The Department for Education worked closely with the Prime Minister’s team to develop those announcements. We are delighted to be able to announce the changes that she set out. I set out in the ministerial statement that I published on Monday the full details that the hon. Lady has just asked for. However, to recap, the threshold will rise to £25,000 from £21,000. That will put a further £360 in the pockets of graduates.

We have taken stock of the views of parents, students and Parliament itself in coming to our decision to freeze tuition fees for the coming academic year. Therefore, we are listening and, where appropriate, we are taking action to ensure that our student finance system is getting the balance of interests right between those of students and those of the general taxpayer.

That is the core principle of our student finance system, which must achieve three goals. First, it must support access for the most disadvantaged, and it is achieving that with great success. Someone from a disadvantaged background is more than 50% more likely to go to a highly selective university than when the Labour party left office, and more than 43% more likely to go to university overall. Students are less likely to drop out, whether they are from BME, disadvantaged, mature or part-time backgrounds, than they were when the Labour party left office. This system is delivering participation and access in a way that alternative student finance systems never have.

Secondly, the system is working for universities. Our universities are 25% better funded per student and per degree than they were under the old student finance
system, before the 2011 reforms. That is of fundamental importance. Does the Labour party really want our universities not to have the resources they need to do excellent teaching and to deliver great research? That is what it is proposing. It is proposing a return to the system that we saw in the run-up to the Dearing report in 1998, a system that saw a real-terms decline in university funding of almost 50%. Those are the changes that the Labour party will deliver if it has a chance to get into office.

Thirdly, our system is fair to the taxpayer. We keep the balance of funding under careful review. As the Prime Minister made clear in her party conference speech and in announcements in Manchester last week, we will announce further steps in that regard in due course.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the measures that my hon. Friend has set out because we have to be fair to students and fair to the taxpayer, too. In the review, will he look at the high interest rate and at lowering the interest rate for students? On a wider issue, the Government announced a big boost to degree apprenticeships. Does he agree that we should be incentivising and putting all financial incentives into degree apprenticeships because the students earn while they learn, there is no debt, they get a job at the end and such apprenticeships help to meet our country’s skills deficit?

Joseph Johnson: We continue to keep all aspects of our student funding system under careful review to ensure that it remains fair and effective, and that we are getting the balance right between the interests of individual students, who go on to have far higher lifetime earnings, and the interests of general taxpayers, whose voices must also be heard in this debate. The interest rate that my right hon. Friend mentioned will be among the things that we will continue to keep under careful watch in the weeks and months to come. Degree apprenticeships are a very promising way of combining the best of higher education and further education. We want them to develop and grow, and we want more providers in the system to offer them. They have huge potential.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Raising the repayment threshold is a positive step and I am delighted that the UK Government are following the Scottish Government’s lead on that matter, but we have to be clear: it is not the panacea that this Government would have us believe. Average student debt on graduation is now more than £50,000, so the announcement needs to be part of a wider reform of student support and funding, which must include bursaries, grants and the abolition of tuition fees—indeed, everything we are doing in Scotland, which is ensuring that our students have the lowest student debt and the best level of support in the UK. We also have more students from deprived backgrounds accessing HE than ever before.

What further steps will this Government take both to increase student support and to reduce student debt? Will the Minister now commit to reducing or better still abolishing fees and reinstating the maintenance grant for those in most need as part of a realistic student support package? Will he guarantee that he will look at reducing the interest on student loans in England, which is keeping young people locked into long-term debt?

Joseph Johnson: No, I certainly will not commit to abolishing tuition fees. They are a strong policy success in many ways and an unsung one. They have enabled us to allow more people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to university than at any point before. They have enabled us to lift student number controls. That is a critical argument for holding on to a system that shares the cost of funding fairly between the individual student, who goes on to have far higher lifetime earnings, and the general taxpayer.

We keep the system under careful review. As the Prime Minister set out in Manchester, we will make further announcements in due course about the rest of the student funding system.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the steps he has taken to try to get the balance right and welcome what he said about keeping this rather startling interest rate under review. I urge him to continue to resist the inevitable populist pressures to sweep away the whole system, which play very well to today’s students but would create great problems. In hindsight, I was lucky enough to have people in low-paid jobs paying taxes to maintain me to meet my living costs when I was studying and being trained to be a reasonably successful barrister when I emerged from university. Therefore, will he resist claims that taxpayers at all levels of income should pay for the costs, which would never be repaid by some of the students, although others will go on to achieve very considerable incomes?

Joseph Johnson: I can certainly assure my right hon. and learned Friend that we will continue to bear in mind carefully the taxpayer interest. It is critical to remember that the Labour party’s proposals, were they to be funded out of income taxation, would add about 2.5p to the basic rate of income tax, so it is vital that we bear taxpayers’ interests in mind and we will continue to do so. He mentioned the interest rate, which we of course keep under careful review. It is worth remembering that this is a heavily subsidised loan product overall. The Government write off about 30% to 40% of the student loan book. That is a deliberate investment in the skills base of this country, not a symptom of a broken student finance system. The interest rate cannot be looked at in isolation.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Minister needs to go back to the Dearing principles. Dearing believed that the expansion of higher education should be based on the student who benefits paying the community through the taxpayer, society and the employer. Can we go back to those principles? I am worried that the Minister and the Prime Minister have already made up their minds about the review they are suggesting. The fact of the matter is that we cannot have a higher education system that is created entirely on a pile of student debt. It is time, cross-party, to think about a radical alternative to what we have at the moment.

Joseph Johnson: The Labour party helped to introduce the system we have today and this Government have been building on it since 2010. It is extraordinarily successful at enabling more people from disadvantaged
backgrounds to get a chance to benefit from higher education. I am startled that the Labour party wants to roll back all that progress. Why would they want to reverse the changes that have enabled more than 50% more students from disadvantaged backgrounds to get into higher education? That is what the hon. Gentleman’s proposals would end up achieving.

**Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): I congratulate the shadow Secretary of State on continuing the fine tradition of women carrying on with speeches in the face of adversity. As someone who represents a university, was it not the case, when we made the decision in 2010 to put up fees, that it was a very simple calculation that if fees were not raised, we would have had to cut the number of young people able to go to university, because otherwise the public purse would not have been able to afford the system we have now? Universities are now well financed: we are not having the debate about university financing that we are having about other areas of public spending.

**Joseph Johnson**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It was the increase in tuition fees that enabled us to take the limit off student numbers and release student number controls. That change is what has driven the sharp increase in participation in higher education by people from lower socioeconomic deciles. It has driven a huge expansion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds getting a chance to go through university and higher education. The Labour party’s policies would reverse all that progress.

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): It is right that the Government have frozen tuition fees, but I wonder whether I could nudge the Minister to go a bit further and get rid of this unsustainable fees system altogether. When is he going to guarantee that universities and their funding will not be adversely affected in any way by the changes the Government are proposing?

**Joseph Johnson**: Universities are well funded. As I said in my opening remarks, funding per student per degree is up by 25% since the reforms the Government introduced in the previous Parliament. We are confident, having assessed the financial position of our institutions, that they can sustain a freeze in the level of fees for this coming financial year and that is the policy the Government set out.

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): Value for money is key and far too many degrees are unnecessarily long. What efforts are being made to offer shorter, more intensive degrees to reduce the final tuition fee bill?

**Joseph Johnson**: There are excellent examples of two-year programmes across our higher education system, such as those offered by the University of Buckingham. It is not alone—there are others. We want many more providers, including high-tariff, highly selective institutions, to start to offer two-year programmes. They have huge potential to access students who have been hard to reach by the higher education system. We will come forward with proposals very shortly to enable the rapid expansion of two-year degrees throughout our system.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister’s replies this afternoon reveal the utter shambles at the heart of the Government’s higher education policy. We told them not to lift the cap on tuition fees. They did not listen and now they have had to U-turn. We told them not to freeze the repayment threshold. They did not listen and now they have had to U-turn. We now find that the Prime Minister has announced a review of student finance and higher education funding with absolutely no idea who is going to lead it, what the scope will be, or what the desired outcome will be. They are making it up as they go along.

I urge the Minister, given that he has not listened to advice in the past year or two, to look at the biggest issue facing students as part of the review, which is not so much the tuition fee system itself, but student finance and the money in their pockets when they are at university, so that, finally, we can have a higher education student finance system that means that, wherever students are from and whatever their background, they have the money they need to succeed throughout the lifetime of their course and beyond.

**Joseph Johnson**: We look carefully at the student finance system all the time. It is constantly under review and we have taken account of the views of colleagues in Parliament, parents and students in coming to the conclusion that we wanted to make the changes we announced last week in Manchester, so it would be unfair to say we are not listening and not responding appropriately. We always keep the system under review to ensure it remains fair and effective, and balances the interests of students and taxpayers appropriately. We will continue to do so in the weeks ahead.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): I very much welcome the increase in the threshold, but in all this focus on finance is there a danger that we forget the whole purpose of going to university, which is to obtain a high-quality education? Will my hon. Friend assure me that whatever reforms he undertakes will not undermine the ability of universities to provide the highest-quality education possible, but that, on the contrary, they will drive universities on to deliver even higher standards?

**Joseph Johnson**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The more interesting part of this debate is about ensuring universities deliver value for money, great teaching and fantastic research with the resources the Government make available to them. In the autumn statement, we increased research spending in our system by the largest amount in 40 years. We should celebrate that fact. We have increased per student per degree funding by 25% since 2010-11. We should be celebrating that fact, because it is enabling our universities to do the great job we need them to do. Through the teaching excellence framework, we are holding them to account more tightly than ever before for the value for money we need them to deliver.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is true that universities are better funded, but the Campaign for Science and Engineering, as well as universities, tell me that the definition of which subjects receive the top-up payment from the Government are out of date and too narrow. To ensure that we maintain funding, especially in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects, can the Minister confirm that the list will be looked at again as part of the review to help universities to fill the skills gap that his own Department is trying fill?
Joseph Johnson: I thank the hon. Lady for her suggestion. We continue to keep that aspect of the system under watch. Clearly, it is important that courses that are more expensive to deliver receive appropriate support from the Government. Obviously funds are not unlimited and we have to be careful in terms of promising further resources to all subjects, but we keep it under review.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) described the current regime as having all the advantages of a graduate tax with none of the disadvantages. Is that not still the case, and would we not want to avoid the ridiculous situation at the University of St Andrews, where Scottish student numbers are capped at 20%?

Joseph Johnson: My right hon. Friend puts it very well. Our system has enabled us to release student number controls, an option that has not been available to the Scottish Government precisely because they have not got the balance right between the individual student and the general taxpayer. I entirely agree with him.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): May I urge the Minister to remember that most students become taxpayers, so it is completely pointless to try to set up a false divide between students and taxpayers? May I also urge him to look at the interest rate repayment? The retail prices index, which is used for student loans, is an outdated measure. It is not the Government’s measure of choice and it makes our students’ debts even more extortionate. We should be looking at the consumer prices index, not the RPI.

Joseph Johnson: As I said to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), we keep interest rates under view, along with other aspects of the system. RPI has historically been the measure of inflation for the student finance system and in some ways is more appropriate than CPI, as it takes account of, among other things, mortgage interest payments and council tax, which are typical expenses for graduates not included in the calculation of CPI.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It is exciting that record funding is now going into higher education, and it is absolutely right, of course, as the Minister said, that we get value for money from our universities. Does he share my concern, therefore, that the number of senior university figures being paid salaries in excess of that of the Prime Minister seems to be spiralling out of control?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is right that there are examples of institutions where senior pay has accelerated very rapidly. It is a matter of concern and great public interest. The new regulator, the Office for Students, will take steps to ensure much greater transparency and accountability in how pay is set, particularly the very high salaries we have seen in parts of the sector.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that students are leaving university with debts on average of over £50,000. How on earth can this burden be a sensible way to equip the next generation to meet the challenges they and society will face?

Joseph Johnson: I say to the hon. Lady what I should also have said to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne): this should best be seen as a graduate contribution, rather than a debt pile. Graduates do not have to repay until they are earning over £25,000, which is a world away from the world of commercial debts, and their debts are written off after 30 years. No commercial loan offers such terms. This is a time-limited and income-linked graduate contribution. We should start to move away from this conception of it as a debt and loan.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding the House that we now have record numbers of disadvantaged pupils going to university.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It’s not true.

Alex Burghart: Is it not unacceptable that the shadow Education Secretary went on Question Time the other night and claimed the opposite?

Joseph Johnson: I agree with my hon. Friend. I find it alarming that the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) is chuntering away saying, “It’s not true.” It is true. The proportion of people from disadvantage backgrounds now going to university has increased. It is undeniably true. It is in the statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Office for Fair Access. The number is 43% higher than it was in 2009-10. A young person is 52% more likely to go to a highly selective university than they were in 2009-10. It is extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman wants to deny it.

Mr Speaker: Order. I was happy to indulge the Minister and to listen to his mellifluous tones, but as he will quickly discover as part of his apprenticeship in this place, the Minister is not responsible for the observations on “Question Time” or elsewhere of the shadow Secretary of State on this or any other matter.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister talks about the expansion in student numbers. How often does he have conversations with the local government and housing Ministers about the impact on housing pressures in cities such as Bristol and on council finances, given that students do not pay council tax and developers do not pay the community infrastructure levy? Although those students are welcome, it does come at a cost.

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Our university students bring enormous economic benefits to cities up and down the country, which is why our universities are such important economic actors across the country. Clearly, local authorities have an important role to play in managing the pressures that students bodies can sometimes put on the provision of public services, and I work closely with colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government to keep abreast of the pressures she mentioned, but there is no doubt that our towns and cities are immeasurably better for having universities within them. They are anchor institutions that are steadfast and have longevity in a way that many other economic entities do not, and we should wholeheartedly welcome their presence.
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Building on the point from my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), will the Minister explore making university finances much more transparent to ensure not only value for money for students but that the money is spent effectively and efficiently to enhance our fantastic institutions?

Joseph Johnson: Yes, we feel it is important that there is greater transparency in the sources and uses of university income. In the regulatory framework consultation in the coming weeks, we expect the Office for Students to make great progress in this area, so that we can boost student confidence that their tuition fee income will be spent clearly, well and for the purposes they want.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): The Minister has said a few times now that he wishes to keep the system fair and effective. I remind him and the Government that further education is also a part of higher education and that, while additional sums have been going into HE, FE has been cut and restricted remorselessly. Would he say that what the Government do with FE is equally fair and effective? I can tell him it is not.

Joseph Johnson: Of course, excellent higher education is being delivered in our further education system, and the teaching excellence framework results in June highlighted the excellence in HE found in FE providers. On the hon. Gentleman’s question about funding, the Government made available an additional £500 million to support the evolution and development of T-levels, a transformational qualification that will help us to achieve parity of esteem for technical and further education in our system.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for being late, Mr Speaker.

The Minister has said two or three times now that student debt should not be considered real debt because it will be written off in 25 to 30 years. Will he or his colleagues in the Treasury publish their forecast of the cost to the public purse in 25 to 30 years of the loans written off as a result of students not meeting their repayments in their entirety? Given that he is raising the threshold for repayments, and so potentially increasing the level of debt, presumably that figure will grow, so he is actually stacking up a burden for a future Chancellor.

Joseph Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman probably knows, we regularly publish assessments of the amount the Government write off at the end of a 30-year period to reflect the fact that they want to make higher education free at the point of access to students. It is called the resource and accounting budgetary charge. Prior to the changes we announced at the party conference, the proportion of the loan book to be written off over that period was approximately 30%, but it will have risen as a result of the changes announced, and we will make the new amount public in due course.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I sympathise with the Labour Front-Bench team’s position on this matter. Basing higher education funding on billions of pounds of student debt that might never be repaid is neither morally right nor operationally pragmatic, so I urge the Minister to commit to a wide-ranging review of higher education funding that encompasses not only tuition fees but maintenance grants and the sustainability of funding for higher education students.

If I may be so bold, Mr Speaker, I also urge the Labour Front-Bench team to enter into a discussion on this matter with their colleagues in Wales. The only Administration now committed to raising tuition fees is the Labour Welsh Government—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am inordinately grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but it is procedurally improper for him to veer off the centre of the fairway, which he previously inhabited. Questions must be to the Government about the policy of the Government, not general exhortations to other Opposition parties, but I am sure if he wants to have a cup of tea in the Tea Room with the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, there might be such an opportunity.

Joseph Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. It is true, of course, that the Labour Government in Wales have recently increased fees beyond the fee cap in England.

BILL PRESENTED

NUCLEAR SAFEGUARDS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Greg Clark, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary David Gauke, Secretary Boris Johnson, Secretary Liam Fox and Secretary David Davis, presented a Bill to make provision about nuclear safeguards; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 109) with explanatory notes (Bill 109-EN).
Fetal Dopplers (Regulation)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.19 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): I beg to move.

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to regulate the sale and use of fetal dopplers; and for connected purposes.

It is an honour to introduce the Bill, which aims to improve standards of monitoring babies’ health as we look to reduce significantly our country’s relatively high neonatal and stillborn death rate. The United Kingdom is ranked 114th out of 164 countries in terms of progress made in reducing the number of stillbirths, and serious concerns have been raised about the use of foetal dopplers. In the next few minutes, I will outline those concerns and the case for regulating the sale of such devices.

Since being elected in 2015, I have looked closely at policies relating to baby health, particularly through the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, which I set up alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). Discussion of the issue is timely, as this is Baby Loss Awareness Week. I pay tribute to all Members who have sponsored the Bill.

As I said during yesterday’s debate, the Government’s support in reducing baby loss has meant that progress has been made. That includes funding for the raising of standards in, for instance, perinatal mental health services, and for improvements in equipment and the physical environment of maternity units. However, we are languishing behind other developed countries when it comes to our stillbirth rates, and that must change.

It is in this context that I hope to secure the House’s support for regulation of the sale of home dopplers, devices that allow pregnant mothers to listen to the heartbeat of their babies. There are serious concerns about the use of those devices. I have heard some consumers speak in favour of dopplers, and I am not suggesting that they have no use, but there is evidence that they can falsely reassure people about the health of their babies. We must place that responsibility in the House who have sponsored the Bill.

The problem with these devices is that anything that moves inside the abdomen, whether it be the baby kicking, air moving in the mother’s intestines or blood flowing in the arteries, is translated into a sound. It requires training to be able to detect a baby’s heartbeat, yet the sale of dopplers is not restricted to medical professionals; they are available over the counter. Given that the expert medical advice that I have mentioned highlights their dangers, I suggest to the Minister that the Department of Health needs to consider how regulation could improve the monitoring of babies’ health and restrict the sale of the devices.

The question that we must ask ourselves is this: if midwives are not using dopplers to identify foetal wellbeing, why are we allowing pregnant women to reassure themselves at home, when seeking medical advice would be the sensible and safe option? According to the instruction manual for a home doppler kit, “It is intended to be used by care professionals, including practical nurses, midwives, relative technicians and physician assistants”.

Dopplers were never originally intended for such widespread sale on the open market. I understand that people may feel that regulation is not necessary, and that as long as people know the risks we do not need to legislate. However, Kicks Count has been raising awareness of the issue for years through, for instance, a national media campaign. The guidelines tacked away in the doppler information booklet are often ignored. We cannot have a situation in which a product that can falsely reassure mothers about their babies’ health is being sold at an expanding rate.

There is already a wealth of advice online—including advice from the NHS and expert organisations—warning against the use of home dopplers, and comprehensive advice is also provided with the instructions on the box. However, that advice is not deterring people from purchasing the devices, and their use is on the rise. Kicks Count, a campaign group that is calling for the banning of home dopplers, has been trying to raise awareness of their dangers for five years, but has not been able to change public attitudes and preconceptions. Its petition has attracted more than 12,000 signatures.

The NHS Choices website says that home foetal heart monitors “are potentially dangerous to the mother and baby’s health”. The Royal College of Midwives has also urged mothers not to use home dopplers. Its website says: “Expectant mothers have been warned against the use of home fetal Doppler devices over fears that they may give false reassurances to mothers about the health of their baby.”

Guidelines issued by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence state that dopplers are “unlikely to have any predictive value and routine listening is therefore not recommended.”

The BBC spoke to the manufacturers of the product, who have acknowledged the advice to restrict the sale of the devices.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): I beg to move.

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I praise Mothercare for its welcome announcement earlier this year that once current stocks ran out, they would not sell any more foetal dopplers. That company recognises the concerns of healthcare professionals, and I hope that other businesses will follow suit, but in this age of Amazon, we cannot rely on the replication of such responsible behaviour by every single seller of dopplers. That is why there is a case for regulation.

The BBC spoke to the manufacturers of the product, and was told that dopplers should not be used as a substitute for professional medical care; nor should
they be relied upon as an indicator of foetal health. It is potentially fatal to do so. In practice, the Bill would introduce a licensing system in England and Wales to ensure that medical professionals were responsible for monitoring foetal health. With such verification, we could remove dopplers from high street shelves and encourage more responsible practice and use of the devices. It would be for the Department of Health to oversee the process as part of our wider ambition to reduce stillbirth rates.

Baby loss is an issue that is thankfully gaining much more attention in Parliament, and we must improve the outcomes for mothers and babies in the UK. The current figures show that our standards are below those of other developed countries, and I know that the Department of Health is working hard in trying to change that. I am not suggesting that the Bill will solve all our problems, but I believe that it will go some way towards improving the monitoring of babies’ health.

Let me end by paying tribute to Kicks Count, and in particular to Elizabeth Hutton, who has put an enormous amount of energy into this campaign and who is here today. Babies and mothers deserve the very best care, and foetal dopplers pose a risk to the high standards for which we strive.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Antoinette Sandbach, Stephen Hammond, Maria Caulfield, John Howell, Tulip Siddiq, Tim Loughton, Diana Johnson, Sir David Amess, Vernon Coaker, David Hanson, Mr Clive Betts and Kelvin Hopkins present the Bill.

Antoinette Sandbach accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018, and to be printed (Bill 110).

Finance Bill

(Clauses 5, 15 and 25, and related new clauses)
Considered in Committee

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON in the Chair]

Clause 5

TERMINATION PAYMENTS ETC: AMOUNTS CHARGEABLE ON EMPLOYMENT INCOME

1.30 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 1, page 12, leave out lines 8 to 12.

This amendment removes the power for the Treasury to amend the meaning of “basic pay” for the purposes of calculating “post-employment notice pay” by regulations.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 12, page 13, line 27, at end insert—

“402F Review of impact of termination payments on low income workers

(1) Within two months of Royal Assent being given to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017, the Chancellor of the Exchequer shall commission a review of the impact of the provisions of sections 402A to 402E on low income workers.

(2) A report of this review must be laid before the House of Commons before the start of the tax year 2018–19.”

This amendment requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry out a review of how the changes to termination payments will affect low income workers before these provisions come into effect.

Amendment 2, page 14, line 15, leave out “different” and insert “higher”.

This amendment removes the power for the Treasury to reduce the £30,000 threshold in connection with the taxation of termination payments by regulations.

Amendment 3, page 14, leave out lines 20 to 23.

This amendment is consequential upon Amendment 2.

Amendment 4, page 14, leave out lines 27 and 28 and insert—

‘(2) “Injury” in subsection (1) includes—

(a) psychiatric injury, and

(b) injured feelings.”

This amendment explicitly includes (rather than excludes) injured feelings within the definition of “injury” for the purposes of payments which are excluded from the provisions of Chapter 3 of Part 6 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 (payments and benefits on termination of employment).

Clause stand part.

Peter Dowd: To be fired from a job is perhaps one of the most difficult experiences for an employee. There are very few people in this Chamber, let alone in the country, who have never had to go through the awkward, bitterly disappointing and scary experience of losing, or potentially losing, a job. This is the daily reality for thousands of people, and it goes to the heart of clause 5.

I ask the Committee to imagine how thousands of people across the country at BAE are feeling at this moment after yesterday’s announcement of job losses. How are those workers feeling in Warton, Samlesbury, Portsmouth, Guildford and RAF Leeming, and in the Chief Secretary’s own county of Norfolk at RAF Marham?
Added to the worry, concern, anxiety and hopelessness of redundancy now comes a potential tax bill to pay for the Government’s hapless management of the economy. Will the writ of clause 5 stretch across the Irish sea? What about the threat to the jobs of those at Bombardier in Northern Ireland, and the thousands of other associated jobs over there?

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman rightly points out the devastating consequences for people who lose their jobs—he refers to particular instances at the moment—but does he also recognise that the Government have created 3 million more jobs, which is helping our economy and those people?

Peter Dowd: This is not relevant to the debate, but a significant number of those jobs are incredibly low paid, and people have not had pay rises for many years. What the hon. and learned Lady says might well be the case, but the reality is that it is not about the quantity; it is about the quality—[Interruption.] Of course it is.

How insensitive and out of touch must this Government be to put clause 5 before Members today of all days? The Prime Minister has vowed that she will do anything to put clause 5 before Members today of all days? The Prime Minister has vowed that she will do anything to put clause 5 before Members today of all days? The Prime Minister has vowed that she will do anything to put clause 5 before Members today of all days? The Prime Minister has vowed that she will do anything to put clause 5 before Members today of all days? The Prime Minister has vowed that she will do anything to put clause 5 before Members today of all days? The Prime Minister has vowed that she will do anything to put clause 5 before Members today of all days? The Prime Minister has vowed that she will do anything to put clause 5 before Members today of all days? The Prime Minister has vowed that she will do anything to put clause 5 before Members today of all days?

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the concerns that those workers will be facing, but he knows perfectly well that the Government’s proposals in this Bill are designed to deal with abuse. He knows that there are no plans to change the rules in a way that would affect people on lower incomes who are not doing anything wrong, and the Minister made that clear on Second Reading. The hon. Gentleman’s scaremongering is making the concerns of those workers worse, rather than reassuring them, which is what he ought to be doing in this House of Commons.

Peter Dowd: The only people who are scaremongering are this Government who are threatening to tax people’s redundancy payments—that is the scaremongering in this House.

Perhaps the Minister would like to withdraw this proposal. I will happily give way to him if he wants to reconsider his decision—he might have discussed it with the Prime Minister. In some instances, a job loss can be even worse if individuals lose their employment because of base and nasty discrimination, whether because of their age, gender, race, religion or sexuality.

The amendments speak directly to the question of how much money an employee who has lost their job should receive in tax-free redundancy pay, and how much an employee who is discriminated against should receive in tax-free compensation from an employment tribunal.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Is the hon. Gentleman not aware that when a tribunal has granted an award on the grounds of discrimination, that is automatically exempt from tax, despite what this clause may or may not be doing?

Peter Dowd: I agree with that particular point.

We know the Government’s overall stated aim is to crack down on what they say is significant avoidance related to non-contractual payments in lieu of notice. To do this, there is a complex set of formulas to mandate what will be considered as notice pay, even when that is not actually given in lieu of notice. Amendment 1 addresses our concern that the Government are giving themselves the power to change the meaning of basic pay for the purpose of calculating notice pay. That could significantly change the basis of the calculations, so the Minister should set out more clearly the intention of this measure.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I agree with everything my hon. Friend says, of course. Does he agree that a lump sum on termination of employment could be considered as potential income over a period of years, and should not be considered just as a lump sum to be taxed within one year?

Peter Dowd: Again, that goes to the heart of the issue. The Government are trying to focus on a particular moment in time, rather than taking into account the fact that a person might be out of employment for a long time.

We see a running theme of this Government in this Bill and so many of their other actions: they are removing powers from Parliament and giving them to Ministers. But other elements have been tacked on to the clause that are seemingly unconnected to the stated aims about payments in lieu of notice. It is clear that the Government are laying the ground so that workers who have already lost their jobs should pay tax on more of their termination payments. Is that the message that the Government are now sending to the likes of the BAE workers? Is it the message they want to send to the victims of redundancy? There can be no other explanation for this clause. It gives the Treasury powers through delegated legislation to raise or lower the tax-free threshold.

Changes to the tax-free allowance for termination payments were first mooted by the Office of Tax Simplification in 2013 when it cited such payments as an employee benefit that would merit further study. I find it rather peculiar that a payment to an employee who has just lost their job is considered as an employee benefit—how bizarre. It is as though a termination payment were some sort of added extra and a huge inconvenience for employers, when in fact that worker has just lost their job and this may well be the last payslip they receive for a long time. The Government have promised not to reduce the threshold, so it comes as a bitter pill that the Bill will allow them to do just that.

If there is no intention to reduce the threshold, Conservative Members should have no hesitation in voting for amendment 2, which would allow the threshold only to be increased through delegated legislation, removing the power to decrease the amount. I wait with bated breath for the Minister to keep the Government’s word and accept our amendment.

In the previous debate, the Minister went to great lengths to claim that the Government’s plans to give themselves the power to water down the tax-free threshold on termination payments, and to exclude injury to feelings from tax-free compensation payments, had nothing
to do with attacks on those who have just lost their jobs. No, instead that is apparently part of some ambitious strategy that the Government have to tackle tax avoidance.

The Minister is so concerned about tax avoidance that he has claimed that “when the Government find tax avoidance, we will clamp down on it.”—[Official Report, 6 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 253.]

Such a bold assertion makes me wonder if the Minister has even read his own Finance Bill. Has he read clause 15, which we will debate later, through which his Government are loosening the rules to allow more non-doms to receive tax breaks if they use money from offshore tax havens to invest in the UK?

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman not aware that clause 15 will bring more money into this country, which is presumably a good thing, and something we can all agree on?

Peter Dowd: We will deal with that a little later. The hon. Gentleman may want to pay attention to my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who will expose that fallacy.

Kelvin Hopkins: Is it not the case that the Government are squeezing money out of people who cannot escape from taxation—namely, less well-off people who lose their jobs—rather than chasing the big money people who evade and avoid taxes?

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend, as ever, puts it in a nutshell. That is the case.

Has the Minister read clauses 29 to 32 and schedules 8 and 9? With those measures, the Government are deliberately signposting a loophole to ensure that non-doms can set up offshore trusts that are exempt from planned changes to non-domiciled status. That exemption completely undermines the Government’s planned changes. The fact is that this Government are not interested in tackling the scourge of tax avoidance and evasion, which costs the UK economy billions every year. They have no interest in ensuring that those who invest foreign money in the UK do so in a transparent and open manner.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that under this Government we have made the largest strides to close the tax gap that we have seen in recent years, which means that we are collecting more from rich people and tax avoiders than ever before?

Peter Dowd: That will be dealt with later, but it is not the case for many multinationals. The papers are strewn with examples of the Government’s sweetheart deals with multinationals, so the hon. Lady cannot tell me that that is the case.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for generously giving way. The latest figure for the tax gap is 6.5%, which he will know is lower than that in any year under the last Labour Government. It was over 8% in the financial year 2005. He will also know that our record on avoidance and evasion is that we have raised £160 billion since 2010. What amount did his party achieve by clamping down on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance when it was in office?

Peter Dowd: It does not include profit shifting from multinationals. I am quite happy to defend the record of the last Labour Government, but I am more interested in this Government and what the next Labour Government will do in this regard.

The Government are only interested in doing what they have always been interested in since the party was founded: dramatically curbing the rights of workers and transferring their money to those who least need it. That is, outrageously, what clause 5 will do. Why else would the Government give themselves the power to lower the tax-free threshold for statutory redundancy payment? Why else would the Government feel the need to further harm discrimination victims? If, as they say, there is a need for clarity in the definition of “injury”, why do they not accept amendment 4, which would make it clear that victims of discrimination should not have compensation for harm taxed as if it were earnings?

We only need to look at the comments of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who wrote an astounding report in 2012 comparing the work practices of Germany and the United Kingdom.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in taking interventions. He suggests that the Conservative party is not looking after those on lower incomes. Does he not accept that it was our party that increased the tax threshold for lower income workers and also introduced the living wage?

Peter Dowd: When we take into account cuts to working tax credits and changes to benefits, that does not stack up, I am afraid. The hon. and learned Lady should know that.

In 2012, the Chief Secretary set out how some employers in Germany were exempt from pesky regulations, such as on unfair dismissal, or social security contributions, and opined that the UK Government should follow suit. She argued that the best way to fight unemployment, particularly among the over-60s and the under-20s, was by encouraging more shift work, work on Sundays and late-night work and, yet again, getting rid of protection against unfair dismissal. Is it any wonder that this Government are hellbent on giving themselves the power to cut the amount that a worker can receive tax-free after they are dismissed?

Rachel Maclean: Why is the hon. Gentleman discussing removing the power of unfair dismissal when that is neither covered by the Bill nor proposed by the Government?

Peter Dowd: Because it goes to the heart of this Government’s attitude—[Interruption.] Narrative; that is a very good word. Should anyone in the Chamber be surprised that the same Government brought in the illegal and deeply unfair employment tribunal fees? It is part of the theme and the narrative. They are now set, once again, to try to limit the amount that workers who are discriminated against in the workplace can receive. The clause is simply another step that this Government have taken in the past seven years to distort and debase hard-won employment rights. If it remains in the Bill unamended, it will give the Government even more power to wreak havoc and misery on the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.
1.45 pm

In the light of yesterday’s announcement of BAE job losses, what message does the clause send to workers such as those at BAE? It says, “You’ve lost your job—a well-skilled job at the forefront of our defence industry—and you may lose your tax-free redundancy sum or have it reduced.”

The Prime Minister was handed a fake P45 last week. That was a joke. Many sacked workers get a real P45, and now, under these proposals, they may also get a big tax bill to accompany it. That is no joke—[Interruption.] Conservative Members may snigger and laugh, but it is no laughing matter. I ask the Minister once again to withdraw this proposal.

Mr Harper: I will deal with the amendments and some of the issues introduced by the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd).

Let me cover first the jobs position. The only criticism I have of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), who raised this matter, is that, of course, jobs are created not by the Government but by businesses operating under the conditions that are created by the Government. It is important we remember that, because we should not take it for granted. The jobs performance of many countries in the European Union has been pitiful by comparison. Not that long ago, this country created more jobs than the rest of the European Union put together. That is not a trivial point; it makes a difference to millions of people across the country.

The hon. Member for Bootle ought not to sneer at the number of jobs. He is also wrong about the quality of those jobs. Figures from the Office for National Statistics clearly show that most of the jobs that have been created are permanent, full-time and skilled managerial or professional jobs. They are not rubbish jobs, as he calls them in that slightly sneering way. They are good-quality jobs and are providing good livelihoods for people across our country.

Kelvin Hopkins: The right hon. Gentleman suggests that Governments effectively have no role in creating jobs. The reality is that macroeconomic policies have an enormous effect on the creation of jobs. Those countries that have chosen foolishly to join the euro and now have a massively overvalued currency, in effect, have lost millions of jobs in some cases. We have fortunately not been part of the euro, and currency flexibility is a crucial part of that; that is Government policy.

Mr Harper: I completely agree, but the hon. Gentleman misquotes me. I did not say that Government have no role. I said that Government do not create the jobs, but I explicitly said that Government create the conditions within which businesses operate and can create jobs. He is absolutely right about that, and I do not necessarily demur from what he said. The euro and the straitjacket of monetary policy across Europe has led to appalling situations in some countries where unemployment rates are very high, which I do not think is sustainable. That is why our economic performance is incredibly strong. We should not throw that away.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Could the right hon. Gentleman explain how, when he was Chief Whip, Thames Water failed to pay taxation between 2010 and 2014?

Mr Harper: I have not got any idea. I was not Chief Whip between 2010 and 2014. Individual taxpayer matters are for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and Ministers do not get involved in individual taxpayer decisions. As the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and several other hon. Members have pointed out, we have reduced the scope for businesses to avoid and evade paying taxes. We have closed that gap and are collecting more revenue that we can spend on our important public services, which I want to turn to.

The hon. Member for Bootle mentioned multinationals. He will know that there is nothing we can do unilaterally to collect money from multinationals that operate in different countries. That has to be part of an international process. He will know that David Cameron’s Conservative Government led that process and set up the initiatives. It is not very exciting, Mrs Winterton, but we are part of what I think is called the base erosion and profit-shifting programme. I am a non-practising chartered accountant, and I am afraid that we talk about such exciting things over coffee, but it is important because it relates to a set of international rules for treating where companies earn income consistently so that we tax them where they are genuinely doing their economic work. This Government cannot do that unilaterally; we have to co-operate. This Government have been leading and shaping that work across the world, not following others or trying to avoid it. Not only do we not have anything to be ashamed of, we have a lot to be proud of, which is shown in the revenue that we have been collecting.

Moving on to the substance of clause 5 and the amendments, I want to return to the point I made when intervening on the hon. Member for Bootle. There is nothing in the proposals that should alarm anybody—particularly those on lower incomes—who is playing by the rules. That issue came up when there were votes on the Ways and Means motions, and the Minister made the Government’s intentions clear and they are not what the hon. Gentleman suggested. Anybody worrying about their job at Bombardier, BAE Systems, about which we heard yesterday, or any other company should know that the Government have not proposed to alter the £30,000 tax-free limit at all. If the Government were to bring forward such a proposal, it would be governed by a statutory instrument under the affirmative procedure, meaning that the matter would come to the House and that Ministers would have to make the case at the Dispatch Box and persuade the House to back a change. There is no such proposal. The hon. Gentleman knows that it is not true and in saying that it is he is scaremongering and worrying people when they have no reason to be worried. He should be ashamed of himself.

As the Minister set out on Second Reading, clause 5 is necessary because the rules are unclear and complex and there is some abuse. Some 85% of termination payments are below the £30,000 threshold and will not be affected, but we must make sure that people do not abuse rules that are there for a good reason: to ensure that employees who lose their jobs are properly compensated and have some money to help them as they look for another job. There is no proposal to change that; this is about dealing with abuse.

On amendment 4 and “injured feelings”, there is a clear reason why it is foolish. Were it agreed to, it would introduce a large loophole into the process that would absolutely be abused. If someone wanted to offer some tax-free payments on loss of office, the payment could...
be labelled as “injured feelings”, rather than as something in the contract, and they could avoid paying tax and national insurance on it. The Minister should be congratulated. We have been fighting through and ensuring that people cannot dream up loopholes. Dealing with tax evasion is not just about acting after it has happened; it is about smartly drafting legislation so that loopholes are not left open in the first place.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful argument. I was just considering his remarks on tax avoidance, loopholes and, indeed, Thames Water, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), and it is important to remember that industrial-scale tax avoidance arose under the previous Labour Government, who did nothing at all to stop this egregious practice. This Government have been passionate, trenchant and active in righting that wrong.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is right. We hear a lot from the Opposition about clamping down on evasion and aggressive tax avoidance, and I give them credit for talking about it a lot. Unfortunately, they did not do anything about it when they were in government. The Minister and this Government talk about it a little bit, but we spend most of our time dealing with it and collecting the money, which is the right balance.

Catherine West: The list definitely dates from 2010—if I am not mistaken, that was when the Tory Government came to power—and includes Google, the Vodafone sweetheart deal, and Amazon. Government Members should concede that, despite some gradual improvements, we are still not where we ought to be and that this group of amendments includes things that taxpayers would like to see this House take much more seriously.

Mr Harper: There are a couple of things in what the hon. Lady says. She is absolutely right that we need to do more to ensure that multinational companies pay tax in the appropriate jurisdiction, but we cannot do that unilaterally. We have to work with other countries because we need international agreement on where a company’s profits are earned. The media sometimes does not understand this, but companies pay tax on profits, not revenues, so the whole argument is about where the profits land and that has to be addressed internationally. This Government are leading that international work, not following it—[Interruption.] It is no good the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) shaking her head. UK tax professionals have been leading this work and continue to drive it forward. We have a proud record.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I have seen some of this from the inside, within the European Union. For example, I have seen measures against trusts and measures to introduce country-by-country reporting blocked by Conservative MEPs, and I frequently saw measures to attempt to introduce international co-ordination blocked by Conservative-related politicians.

Mr Harper: No. First, it cannot just be done at European Union level—[Interruption.] No, we have to do it globally, because many of the companies involved are US companies. The base erosion—[Interruption.] I do not know why the Opposition Front-Bench team are laughing. The base erosion and profit sharing programme comes from the OECD.

Catherine West: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: I cannot take an intervention when I am still dealing with the first one. The base erosion and profit sharing programme is a global initiative, and we are leading on that work.

As for the point of the hon. Member for Oxford East about the EU, if I remember rightly, the reason why the Government blocked the French-driven profit sharing programme was that they were part of an EU plan to try to drive up the total amount of tax that we take from business, not to ensure that companies pay tax in the right way. We are not an anti-tax country. That move was part of an EU plan to avoid countries being able to have competitive tax regimes and to avoid businesses locating in the United Kingdom. The French wanted to stop that because many of their businesses and smartest people now work in London or other parts of the UK, but the change was not in our national interest and I believe that that was why we blocked it. However, we need to continue the international work, and I am pleased that we have been leading on it.

My final point is about workers’ rights. I understand that the hon. Member for Bootle has to do this stuff to please people on his side, but he is absolutely wrong. This Government have absolutely no agenda of the sort that he mentioned. When talking about our leaving the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that we want to protect workers’ rights. We stand four-square behind the rights that are in place, and we will be legislating for them in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which I am sure will provide many hours of joy and fun in Committee. You may even be in the Chair, Dame Rosie, to listen to some of those exciting debates. We are going to protect workers’ rights, and there is nothing at all in the proposals to concern somebody who is worried about losing their job. This is about cracking down on people who have been abusing the provisions that protect legitimate workers who lose their jobs, using them as an excuse to get tax-free cash out of the system and cheat the taxpayer. That is what the proposals are about and that is why I hope that the Committee rejects all the amendments and supports clause 5.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is good to be back in the House after a bit of a recess and to be here again talking about the Finance Bill. It is our second such Bill this year—our second of three—so we are here for the long haul. I want to discuss termination payments and the relevant amendments tabled by the Scottish National party and Labour. The Government have been clear that they are just closing a loophole, but the Budget suggested that the measure will generate an extra £430 million a year. That is £430 million a year that these workers will not be getting when they receive their termination payments. However the Government want to dress it up, this is additional tax on these people who are losing their jobs and receiving termination payments. These people are in a vulnerable situation, as they are receiving a termination payment and are no longer in employment and they will be taxed more as a result.
2 pm

Like the Labour party, the Scottish National party has concerns about the impact of that measure on low-income workers, and we have made that clear in our amendments. I understand that the Government are saying that 85% of those who get these termination payments and will be affected by this change are not low-income workers, but the other 15% are, and my concern is for them. If someone finds themselves out of a job, an amount of money is needed to allow them to get back on their feet and to ensure that they do not have a significant knock to their confidence, so that they can get back to the workplace after a relatively short time.

The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) used the phrase “we have closed the gap”. I am not sure that it is quite closed yet. There is still a gap as regards non-payment of tax. Fair enough, measures have been taken to move towards ensuring that tax is paid by the non-payment of tax. Fair enough, measures have been used in order to close that gap. I am not sure that they can get back to the workplace after a relatively short time.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Lady may remember that the tax expert Richard Murphy calculated at one point that the genuine tax gap—not the one that the Government give us—was £119 billion a year. That has no doubt come down slightly, but there is a long way to go before we collect that tax. That figure overwhelms the amount of money that the Government will squeeze out of workers who are losing their jobs.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree and I think that the tax gap is probably significantly larger than the Government are suggesting. On that note, small countries are very good at having a very small tax gap—a wee plug for Scottish independence there.

We have a couple of other specific concerns about termination payments. We are still not clear about people who have faced termination as a result of injury, injury to feelings or psychiatric injury. We do not want them to receive less as a result of this change. I heard what the Minister said about those people who have been involved in discrimination cases when the decision has been in their favour, but we want to ensure that people who are trying to move on from a situation after termination but who have been injured or have suffered an injury to feelings or a psychiatric injury are not disadvantaged by this change in the rules.

I will not speak for much longer, but let me say one more thing. The Government’s explanatory notes say that the Government are looking to ensure that all payments in lieu of notice, not just contractual payments in lieu of notice, are taxable earnings. That way of putting it is what most concerns me, because it is clear that workers will be impacted by this change when it comes in. I expect that this change will be proposed by the Government and accepted, so I would very much like a commitment from the Minister that, if it comes in in the next tax year, the Treasury will do an impact assessment one or two years in to see the specific impact on that group of low-income workers who the Government suggest are in the minority. I would like to see its impact, and if it proves to be particularly negative, I want the Treasury to take mitigating steps to change it.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): “The narrative”—those were the words used by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman in response to the measure. We should remind ourselves that the narrative is that we are discussing employment-related tax treatments against a backdrop of a significant increase in employment and a significant decrease in unemployment. That goes to the heart of this whole debate. Employment is something that we all want to see expanding through the UK economy. Having started and run a small business and having recruited people to that business, I know that no employer recruits someone with the intention of kicking them out. I hope that that goes without saying, but I have said it nevertheless.

Rachel Maclean: Does my hon. Friend agree that a small business owner with just a couple of staff has to go through a lot of stress in the whole process of making someone redundant? We should not forget that small business owners are people as well, often quite low paid because they are sacrificing salary. That can lead to mental health issues, stress and anxiety.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will respond to her point in a few moments, but it is a very important one and we must not overlook it.

We have had a jobs boom over the past few years, in stark contrast to many other developed economies around the world and across Europe, which has struggled. In particular, in the UK, which is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises and, indeed, microbusinesses, which often have only one or two principals and one or two employees, it is important that we continue to give confidence to those businesses, many of which do not have a large administrative back-office function. That is often the case, as it was in the business that I started. I was doing the client interaction and sales, and a colleague of mine was doing the journalism side of the business, but we were also the accountants and the HR department. To give confidence to small and microbusinesses that they can employ people, it is incredibly important that everything to do with employment is as simple and transparent as possible.

At the moment, the tax treatments around severance payments are very competitive. Depending on the combination of events, the payment can be taxed any one of a number of ways. Although I did not speak about this set of clauses on Second Reading, I did welcome the Bill, and I welcome this general move to simplify, to clarify and to give small businesses in particular—although of course this affects businesses of all kinds—the confidence to employ people, knowing that the HR and financial treatment around that employment will be as simple as possible.

The Opposition spokesman kept talking as though severance payments were not taxed at the moment, and of course they are. They are taxed—

Amelie Dodds indicated dissent.

James Cleverly: Above the £30,000 threshold, there are tax treatments. Through the Bill, the Government are seeking to make the treatment of the figure above £30,000 most important and straightforward—[Interruption.] I absolutely welcome that.
Anneliese Dodds: The threshold.

James Cleverly: Yes, but at the moment it is £30,000, and that is what it says here—[Interruption.]

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There are too many sedentary interventions, and it makes it rather difficult for the Hansard writers, as well as everyone else.

James Cleverly: I am happy to take interventions, but I have never been a particularly good lip reader, so the Opposition will have to help me out on that one.

The Opposition suggested that somehow there would be some terrible Government sleight of hand to try to dandle people out of their money at a point at which they have lost their job, but it has been made absolutely clear by the Minister and in the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) that there will be transparency in any changes. None are proposed, but if they were, they would follow the affirmative procedure, which would mean a Minister at the Dispatch Box, in front of the House, being quizzed and questioned by the House. They would have to be voted on by the House. So the idea that there would be some sort of back-office sleight of hand in this is inaccurate.

At a time when we have, unfortunately, heard news of proposed job losses in one of our key businesses, the Opposition’s approach is untidy. I understand why their Front Benchers have done this—they want to attack the Bill—and I am sure that if I were in their shoes, I would find whatever means I could to try to criticise the Bill. The simple truth is that there are no such proposals and nothing in the Bill to imply that there would be, but it is right that the Government maintain the opportunity to be flexible in the future.

Peter Dowd: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in the light of the shake-up in these organisations and the dreadful stress that these people are under, introducing this clause at this time is completely inappropriate and heartless? The Government can bring it back another time if they wish.

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman will be unsurprised to hear that I do not agree with him. The Bill is where the proposal is and the passage of the Bill has been timetabled in the way that it has. The idea that we delay changing the tax treatments of severance payments to a point in time when no one in British society is in the process of losing their job is farcical, as I am sure that, on reflection, he will recognise.

As has been said, the £30,000 threshold means that 85% of termination payments are completely unaffected. I am sure we have all heard anecdotes about businesses seeking to manipulate the definitions of the various elements of severance payments specifically to avoid the tax that is owed. Surely, Opposition Members would wish to make sure, as Government Members would, that tax is applied fairly, dispassionately and transparently, and that it affects all people equally. Once again, a disproportionate burden would otherwise fall on small businesses, which do not have that administrative back-office function and cannot play manipulative games to avoid tax. They are the ones that have to pay the full tax, as is right.

Some companies may have clever back-office accountants looking at ways in which to massage the definitions of the various elements of a severance payment to minimise the tax—that is due to the Treasury and that we want and need to fund public services. Surely, the Labour party is not suggesting we should turn a blind eye when a clever set of accountants can massage figures, making sure that the burden falls wholly and solely on small businesses, which do not have the opportunity to employ people to do that kind of smoke-and-mirrors work? I cannot imagine that is what Labour would want to do.

Amendment 4 proposes including the words “injured feelings”. Again, I am sure that this is being proposed with the best intentions, but the Labour party must realise that putting into a Bill a definition that is so vague and open to abuse is just inviting unscrupulous businesses to use it as a means of avoiding the tax that should be fairly paid upon a severance.

Kirsty Blackman: I am guessing that the hon. Gentleman is unaware—perhaps he is not—that “injury to feelings” is a legal term. It is used within that profession, and it is recognised and understood. Therefore, it is completely reasonable to include it in an amendment.

2.15 pm

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Lady for informing me of that. I am more than happy to look in more detail at that definition, because I do not have it at my fingertips, but putting it in the Bill would present to unscrupulous employers something that looks like an invitation to use this as a back-door route to avoid the tax that should rightly be paid upon severance. It would be unwise for that to go through, because it would send exactly the opposite signal to what we are trying to achieve with the relevant clauses elsewhere in the Bill, which is to say, “If you play by the rules, fine.” The vast majority of people who receive severance pay have no need to concern themselves and neither do the vast majority of businesses. The only individuals who should be a little distressed by what is going through in the Bill are the very small number of companies that have abused the severance payment structures to avoid paying the tax that is fair. I have little sympathy for those companies. If they play by the rules, we are on their side. If they seek to bend or break the rules, I have no sympathy whatsoever.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am seeking to ensure my hon. Friend understands that this does not benefit the companies; this is of benefit to individuals who take advantage. There is no tax benefit to the companies because it is income tax that is payable. [Interruption. ] Well, there is national insurance—employers’ NI.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. There is little direct financial benefit to the company—

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): NI.

James Cleverly: Although, as I am reminded, there is an NI implication. Again, I have heard a number of anecdotes about conversations with departing employees from not the most honourable of companies in which things have been said such as, “If this complaint were to
yet here we are talking about sums of £30,000? It is company as Thames Water paid zero corporation tax, curious that, between 2010 and 2014, such a large threshold could only be increased, not decreased. 

would be £71,000 today. Amendment 2 would mean the increased since 1988; had it risen in line with prices, it important given the fact that the threshold has not been via the backdoor of delegated legislation could lead to Government to reduce the £30,000 tax-free threshold they should be helping and supporting them.

my experience, a sacked worker's priority is to receive a have been sacked or discriminated against at work. In talking about adequately compensating people who rights lawyer.

The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) said that there was tax avoidance on an industrial scale in this area, but that simply is not borne out by the evidence or indeed my experiences as an employment rights lawyer.

Before entering this place, I was an employment rights lawyer for more than a decade, so this issue is very important to me. I represented dismissed and discriminated against employees for many years, and saw at first hand the devastating effect that the way they had been treated had on their lives. The Bill clearly seeks to narrow the scope of termination payments. Of course tax avoidance should be clamped down on, but the Government's own consultation did not reveal evidence of widespread abuse. The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) said that there was tax avoidance on an industrial scale in this area, but that simply is not borne out by the evidence or indeed my experiences as an employment rights lawyer.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Lady is making a strong and passionate case. My concern was industrial-scale tax avoidance, because big corporates were allowed to game the tax system without any action being taken to stop them doing that, largely because of the Brownite prawn cocktail circuit that was pursued in the early 2000s. In the last Parliament, I fought a campaign to get a lot of the law in this area tightened, and I am glad to say that a lot of that was taken forward.

Ellie Reeves: This is not about big corporates; I am talking about adequately compensating people who have been sacked or discriminated against at work. In my experience, a sacked worker’s priority is to receive a fair settlement, not to avoid tax. It seems to me to be another example of the Government hounding people when they are at their most vulnerable, when instead they should be helping and supporting them.

The introduction of measures that will allow the Government to reduce the £30,000 tax-free threshold via the backdoor of delegated legislation could lead to profound effects on people’s lives without there being any proper scrutiny in Parliament. That is even more important given the fact that the threshold has not been increased since 1988; had it risen in line with prices, it would be £71,000 today. Amendment 2 would mean the threshold could only be increased, not decreased.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is curious that, between 2010 and 2014, such a large company as Thames Water paid zero corporation tax, yet here we are talking about sums of £30,000? It is estimated that there is £6 trillion in tax havens, yet we are quibbling the amounts that go to individuals who have had a difficult time in the workplace.

Ellie Reeves: I absolutely agree. The clause will penalise people who have lost their jobs and people who have been discriminated against—

Rachel Maclean: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ellie Reeves: May I deal with the intervention I am currently dealing with first? People who have lost their jobs and been discriminated against often get small amounts of money in the wider scheme of things, but it makes a huge difference to their lives while they are looking for another job, getting back on their feet and getting their confidence back after the treatment they have been through.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is talking about people who have lost their jobs who have been discriminated against. All our hearts would go out to someone in that situation, but is she aware that the tax-free threshold for people who have been discriminated against is not affected by the provisions in the Bill? Such awards will be wholly tax-free under the Bill, so does she agree that discrimination is not relevant to the debate?

Ellie Reeves: Discrimination is relevant to the debate, because the Bill would introduce legislation that would tax injury-to-feeling awards on termination. Discrimination can of course have a devastating effect on a worker’s life and career, yet the Government seem to treat victims of discrimination as a way to top up the Government coffers.

Rachel Maclean: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ellie Reeves: I have already given way several times; I wish to make some progress.

Consider the example of a mother who has been discriminated against and dismissed for taking maternity leave. Rather than enjoying her time at home with her baby, she feels stressed and anxious about the future and her capacity to provide for her family.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is being extremely generous in giving way. I just wish to put on the record that discrimination awards will not be affected by the Bill. I have a copy of the Bill here: there is full exemption for compensation awarded by an employment tribunal relating to discrimination awards. She is talking about a case of a mother who is discriminated against, and none of us would wish to see that—I am a mother myself and I have employed mothers—but that is not what the Bill is about.

Ellie Reeves: The hon. Lady is talking about discrimination awards in employment tribunals; I am talking about discrimination awards as part of termination payments. They are two distinct things. As I understand it, the Bill would tax as earnings discrimination awards as part of termination settlements. For example, were someone to settle with their employer rather than go to tribunal, any injury-to-feelings element of the settlement that was above the £30,000 threshold would be taxed. That is a significant change for people who suffer discrimination. It might affect the mum who settles with her employer following her dismissal after having a
child, or the disabled worker whose employer would rather sack them and make a termination payment than make adjustments for them. Such people will be worse off because that element of their award will be taxable.

It cannot be right that, rather than supporting victims of discrimination, the Government seem to want to use them as a source of revenue. These people need protections, not to be used to provide a revenue stream, so I urge all Members to vote for the Labour amendments.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): The shadow Minister said that the measures in the Bill are part of a wider pattern of Government behaviour. Indeed they are: they follow in the footsteps of the 75 different measures we have already taken to clamp down on tax avoidance and the £160 billion we have already raised for our public services by doing so. They follow in the footsteps of the changes we have made to capital gains tax, which have increased the amount we have raised and ended the disgraceful situation in which hedge fund bosses were famously paying less tax than their cleaners. They follow in the footsteps of the changes we have made to corporation tax to prevent international avoidance—the so-called Google tax. They follow the changes we have made to the taxation of non-doms to create more balance and end the situation whereby people could be here for 25 years and still claim to be non-doms. So the Bill is part of a wider pattern of behaviour: it is part of an ongoing war on tax avoidance that the Government are waging.

On the specifics of the amendments, it seems to me that the Opposition are incredibly well intentioned. We all want the same things—we all want to drive down tax avoidance—but the problem with amendment 1 is that, in the real world, the Treasury is constantly engaged in a war of attrition with people who are constantly trying to create new loopholes and ways to avoid tax. As quickly as the Treasury closes one loophole, there are people trying to create others.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a pity that, since the start of the new Government, Mr Pickles, who was formerly a Member in this House and is now in the other place—[Interruption.] To the best of my knowledge, he has not been replaced as the anti-corruption tsar. Indeed, unless the House has been informed otherwise, that particular thread of Government policy seems to be lost.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point.

The reality is that many Government Members have close associations with the City and with big money. I do not want to accuse anyone individually, but that is the reality. Many have been in hedge funds and wherever. The biggest scandal of all took place within Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. A few years ago, Dave Hartnett, who was the boss of HMRC, was involved in sweetheart deals with the corporates, losing countless billions for the Treasury. He was not doing anything illegal, but cosy deals with corporates is not exactly public service. When he finally left HMRC, he set himself up as a consultant, advising the same corporates on how to avoid taxes. That is an absolute scandal. We should be stopping such practices.

Tax officers should be public servants who are driven by the public service ethos. At the grassroots level, the ordinary members of staff are driven in that way. Many of them are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, with which I am associated. The PCS has argued for many years that we should have more tax officers, and that they should be better paid and better appreciated for the work that they do. I would like to think that, instead of closing tax offices and squeezing the number of tax officials, this Government would increase their number. PCS has told me on many occasions that every tax officer collects many times their own salary, so every time we appoint another tax officer, we get more than their salary coming back. That is what we should be doing. It has been a scandal for many years. Even before this dreadful Conservative Government, we were not collecting sufficient tax. We were allowing tax evasion and tax avoidance to go unchallenged. I want to see a world in which people, particularly those with plenty of money, pay their taxes at the highest level. I am not talking about ordinary working people.
Finally, it was recently suggested that quantitative easing, which is not strictly relevant to this amendment, is benefiting the better-off and not the ordinary people. It would be good if some of that QE could find its way into the Treasury coffers and help the spend on public services. That would be a better way of generating more jobs, more demand and better services in our economy.

Rachel Maclean: This is indeed an important Bill. I look forward to serving on the Public Bill Committee and to helping it to become law.

We have heard a number of things about narrative and the tone from the Opposition. I say to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) that I have nothing to do with hedge funds or with rich people in the City—unless we are talking about the city of Birmingham and about my friends who are rich in happiness and goodwill, if not money.

There is always a fine balance to strike when seeking to legislate on these matters. Generally speaking, we have a good regime of employment law in this country, notwithstanding some of the questions about the gig economy, which we are currently examining in the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Although the gig economy is outside the scope of this debate, it does need further scrutiny.

I am worried about Labour’s amendments. This Bill provides protections. It protects the public purse against those who seek to avoid and evade tax. The Opposition have raised some examples, and they were right to do so. This Bill does not condone those people or support their actions at all.

We know that, in most cases, the British taxpayer agrees with the system of taxation, but when that system is seen as unfair, it does lose the consent of ordinary workers. It is usually people with deep pockets and the resources to take advantage of the loopholes who cause deep anxiety among the British public. Therefore, I welcome the measures that we have set out in the Bill as they will end such practice.

The Opposition’s answer to the issue of taxation and revenue is to raise taxes on everyone. That is not the Conservative view. We prefer to keep taxes on the low paid and on small businesses low—that is what we have done already—and, at the same time, to crack down on the tax avoiders. Ultimately, that brings in more tax, and underpins a thriving economy.

There are measures in this Bill that will end some exploitative practices of big businesses and of a minority of individuals in this country. That will help the Government to collect the tax that is due to them from big businesses as well as from overseas investors and rich non-doms. We cannot allow a minority of businesses to tarnish the reputation of UK plc and our small and medium-sized businesses. However, we must remember that 99% of businesses in this country are SMEs. They are not this caricature of rich, greedy hedge fund people which, frankly, I do not recognise, but we hear about from the Opposition. They are ordinary men and women up and down this country, advancing their dream of a better life by setting up a small business. In so doing, they are creating jobs for other people. I worry about the tone of this debate as it sends out a message from this Chamber.

We need to send out a message that encourages people to take that risk and start businesses. That is why we need to strike the right balance.

I speak from experience. Before I entered this House, I spent 25 years working in small businesses. I ran my own business and I was a human resources director in other businesses. I have worked for some small midlands manufacturing companies, advising them on employment issues. I have seen the stress and worry that employers go through when they are dealing with a termination. Of course, termination has an impact on the employee, but let us not forget that these employers are trying to do their best under difficult circumstances. Without doubt, there are some unscrupulous employers, but I have seen small business owners lose sleep and suffer from stress and anxiety. Sometimes, despite the best efforts of management, a job does not work out. We are dealing with a trust relationship after all. We are talking about the vagaries of human nature, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) observed, small businesses often do not have access to qualified HR advice and employment lawyers as they are too expensive and beyond their budget.

Some of Labour’s amendments, particularly those on the injury-to-feelings issue, cloud the whole legislative landscape for small business owners, making it extremely difficult for them to know what to do in a stressful situation. That is why I do not support these amendments. The provisions are purely about preventing the manipulation of the rules.

Kelvin Hopkins: Just on that point about small businesses, I agree with the hon. Lady that they are immensely valuable to the economy and we must support them. However, would the Government not do better to stop banks such as RBS squeezing the life out of small businesses by very, very unfair financial practices, which has certainly happened to businesses in my constituency?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am sure that members of the Treasury team are doing everything they can on those points, and I welcome the work that they are doing in that regard. I have also seen small businesses in my constituency being affected by such practices. I do not condone them at all. We all want a country where good work is rewarded, and where employers and employees can work together. No system of legislation is perfect, but this Bill does strike the right balance. It is sensible and well thought out and we will continue to scrutinise it in Committee. Therefore, I will not vote for Labour’s amendments.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I often think, when I get to my feet in the Chamber, that my job is not really to talk to the people in the Chamber. I am sure that there are many clever people in here—far better educated than me—who know all the complex details of the Bill and the nuances of the financial implications. But my job is to represent the people of Willenhall and Bloxwich in Walsall North. If they were to tune into the Parliament channel at the moment, they might be slightly perplexed as to what was going on, so I thought I would try to assist them by considering amendment 1 particularly.

I would tell my constituents that £30,000 of a termination payment is currently untaxed and this Government have no plans to change that. Opposition Members
might say, “Come on—what are you playing at? You’re putting something in here so you can do something sneaky in the future.” My answer is that there is actually a statutory instrument that requires an affirmative procedure. The people of Walsall would say, “What the hell is that?” And I would tell them it means that if the Minister wants to do something in future, he needs to come back to the Chamber to get the approval of this House and he also needs the approval of the House of Lords.

My constituents would then say, “That sounds pretty reasonable, but can we trust you? Surely you’re looking to take more tax off us in the future.” I would say, “Are you kidding? Look at this party. What have we done for you? We have increased the level above which you will pay tax from £6,500 to £11,500—almost doubling it. This country has the highest level of employment it has ever had and there are more women in jobs than ever before. And which party gave you the minimum wage? Not only was it the Conservative party”—[Interruption.]

My apologies—small technical problem. Okay, I would say, “Which party subsequently increased the minimum wage to the level that we are at now—a massive increase on the original introduction level?” [Hon. Members: “Ah!”] And I would tell my constituents that this party has the aspiration to increase the minimum wage even further in the future.

Peter Dowd: Was it not the hon. Gentleman’s party that voted against the minimum wage?

Eddie Hughes: I think I remember the hon. Gentleman saying, “Let’s not talk about the past. Let’s talk about what this Labour Government might do for you in the future.” Well, there is not going to be a Labour Government. There is going to be a Conservative Government who will continue to increase the minimum wage. If my constituents are going to trust anybody in the House, it should be the Conservatives. We have no intention of taking more tax off people. If we did, we would have to come back to the House to get approval anyway.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker—sorry, I mean Dame Rosie. I have just been thrown by that magnificent speech by my hon. Friend for Wealden (Ms Ghani) agree that we want clarity, barriers to employment. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) agree that we want clarity, which will ultimately help employment and small businesses?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is spot on. We want absolute clarity. As I continue with my speech, the Committee will realise that the changes in clause 5 will barely have an impact on most people in our constituencies. The changes are not asking someone who has been made redundant to pay more tax. The first £30,000 of the termination payment remains exempt from tax as well as national insurance contributions. As a result, the changes in clause 5 will not have an impact on 85% of people who receive termination payments. If we have constituencies where 90% of businesses are SMEs, our figure will probably be even higher than 85%. On average, 25% receive a payment of more than £54,000, so they are not exactly the least well-off in society. Those who are not following the rules and are not manipulating the loopholes will pay no additional tax. It is simply about clarifying the fine details.

The changes in clause 5 will bring in £430 million a year by 2022. They clarify and tighten the regulations, preventing tax avoidance and ensuring that everyone pays their way. Amendment 4 will open up more wriggle room. If we accept it, what is to stop larger companies putting something in here so you can do something giving the most generous pay-offs . The changes in clause 5 will have an enormous effect in my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). Like my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), I am a business owner. There are already too many barriers to employment. The Bill seeks to give clarity and the amendment would add to the complexity of employment. We do not want further barriers to employment. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) agree that we want clarity, which will ultimately help employment and small businesses?
from 10% under Labour, so let us just stick with the facts. I welcome clause 5, which will add to that record and ensure the tax system works for everyone.

Mel Stride: What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Rosie, and to respond to the first of what I am sure will be a series of lively and exciting debates on the Finance Bill. Before I respond to some of the more detailed points raised, as well as the amendments, let me remind the Committee of the overall purpose of clause 5.

The clause is designed to tighten and clarify the tax treatment of termination payments to make the rules fairer and to prevent manipulation. Our tax treatment of termination payments is one of the most generous in the world. That is something of which we can be proud and something that this clause does not change, but the current rules can also be unclear and complicated, as many hon. Members have suggested. Some payments are taxed as earnings, others are taxed only above £30,000, and others are completely exempt from income tax and national insurance contributions. Most employers use the rules as intended, but the complexity in the system leaves it open to manipulation. Indeed, a small minority of individuals and employers, particularly those with the most generous pay-offs—this is an important point—have thought to manipulate the rules by categorising large pay-offs as termination payments, rather than earnings.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) made the point that the tax-free amount has not been indexed for many years. Had it been indexed properly, it would now be £71,000, not £30,000. Would not that be a way of avoiding any of these difficulties, as the lump sum would be so much bigger?

Mel Stride: This is one of the most generous thresholds in the world. In fact, there is no threshold at all in Germany and the United States of America, because none of these payments is treated as being tax-exempt.

Such categorisation means that payments qualify for the £30,000 tax exemption and an unlimited employer national insurance contributions exemption. The situation is clearly unfair for the vast majority of employees, who are unable to manipulate their payments in this way. Clause 5 makes changes to prevent such manipulation in the future, while still ensuring that the vast majority pay no income tax on their payment. The first £30,000 of all termination payments will remain exempt from tax.

The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) made a general point about the Conservative party’s treatment of workers, and I make no apologies for the way this Government have stood up for workers up and down our country. We are committed to enhancing workers’ rights. We introduced the national living wage, and we doubled fines for firms that break the rules in that respect. We appointed the first director of labour market enforcement, and we are committed, as we have constantly said, and as our Prime Minister has made clear, to protecting workers’ rights as we leave the European Union.

Nearly 85% of payments are below £30,000, so retaining the threshold will ensure that the vast majority of people going through the difficult experience of being made redundant will still pay no tax whatever. That means that the UK continues to have one of the most generous tax exemptions for termination payments, and I have mentioned Germany and the United States having no tax exemption at all.

Clause 5 tightens the tax rules for termination payments to prevent manipulation—a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr. Harper) in an excellent contribution. He highlighted our overall record on bringing in taxes where attempts are made to avoid tax, and I referred to the £160 billion raised since 2010. He referred to our being at the forefront of the OECD base erosion and profit shifting project, and we have also brought in the diverted profits tax to clamp down on the kind of behaviour he referred to.

Let us not lose sight of the purpose of bringing in tax, which is to raise public finances so that we can employ doctors, nurses, paramedics, police and soldiers and pay for all those great public services that all of us hold so dear. That is why I am so proud of this Government’s record on clamping down on tax avoidance more generally.

The Office of Tax Simplification has said:

“the well-advised can often end up better off than the unadvised, as they are more able to structure their employment contract (or, indeed, their termination payment) to achieve the better tax treatment.”

The hon. Member for Bootle said in this House only last month:

“If there is genuine evidence of the abuse of payments in lieu of notice, that needs to be acted on”—[Official Report, 6 September 2017: Vol. 628, c. 206.]

It is fair to say that, while the hon. Gentleman is a very amiable fellow, he is not right about everything, but on this point he is actually very right. This clause is to deal with the very abuse about which he has previously expressed concern. We will prevent employers from categorising large pay-offs as tax-free payments, rather than earnings. Instead, employers will now be required to tax what the employee would have earned if they had worked their notice period in full. All payments in lieu of notice will now also be taxable as earnings to equalise the treatment of those with and without a contractual right to such a payment.

Finally, clause 5 clarifies that there is a total tax exemption for payments on account of injury or disability of an employee. In 2014, the Office of Tax Simplification raised the possibility of removing this exemption. It recognised that that would be a draconian approach, but it noted that interpretation is “often a problem area for employers and their advisers.”

However, we have not pursued that approach. Instead, we have provided certainty by confirming the current position established by case law in statute. The total exemption relates to termination payments provided on account of a physical or psychiatric injury that prevents the employee from carrying on the duties of the employment, which hopefully addresses the point raised by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). Therefore, employees with evidence of an identified medical condition will pay no tax on related termination payments.

Some Members raised concerns in previous debates that the Government would be taxing compensation paid to employees where it is proven that they have been
discriminated against. Once again, I am happy to reassure them. All compensation for awards for proven discrimination during work will continue to remain completely exempt from tax. There is an interesting interaction between my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on this point. We accept that, where there is a tribunal award in respect of injury to feelings, it is treated in exactly the same way as when an employer accepts that discrimination has actually occurred. All the clause seeks is to confirm the long-standing position that genuine compensation payments are tax exempt, while ensuring there is no loophole that can be used to reduce the tax that is owed.

Let me now turn to the amendments. As the hon. Member for Bootle set out, amendment 1 would remove the power to amend the meaning of basic pay for the purposes of calculating post-employment notice pay by regulation. When we consulted on this measure, we listened to responses that asked us to make the basic pay definition more simple. It now excludes overtime, bonuses, commission and tips. However, we introduced this power to allow the Government to act quickly and to remain flexible if there is manipulation in the future. Any amendment to the meaning of basic pay would be subject to a statutory instrument under the affirmative procedure, so the House would have to expressly approve any change to the meaning. I therefore urge the House to resist the amendment.

Amendment 2 and consequential amendment 3, also tabled by the Labour party, would remove the power to reduce the £30,000 threshold by regulation. Some Members have raised concerns during the debate that the Government intend to reduce this tax-free amount. We have no intention to do so. If we were to do so, we would, as my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) pointed out in his excellent speech, be required to do so by an affirmative statutory instrument. However, I repeat that we have no intention of reducing this tax-free amount. I therefore urge the House to resist the amendment.

Amendment 4 would include injured feelings within the definition of injury. As I outlined earlier, clause 5 confirms that termination payments provided on account of physical or psychiatric injury will be completely tax exempt—an important point raised by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North. However, the clause also confirms the established position that injury to feelings is not covered by this definition. The reason for this restriction is clear: without it, there would be a large loophole. That is why there is a loophole.

In conclusion, the Government recognise that losing a job is a challenging time, but we must remain vigilant to opportunities for the tax rules to be manipulated. That is why clause 5 sets out a fair and proportionate set of changes that will continue to protect the vast majority of employees. The first £30,000 of a termination payment will remain tax-free, as will the whole of the compensation payment for discrimination during employment. However, where there were opportunities for manipulation, the loopholes must be closed, and they now will be. I therefore urge hon. Members to reject the amendments and agree to clause 5.

**Peter Dowd:** The Government seem to have taken a scattergun rather than forensic approach to this matter, affecting everyone regardless of the circumstances. Time after time they go for easy targets. If they have no intention of revising thresholds downwards, what is the point? Why are they wasting the Committee’s time? The key point is whether people who have been made redundant should have further worries about their financial future vis-à-vis redundancy, and that sets a hare running, whether the Government like it or not.

**3 pm**

As for the consultation, the bottom line is that it was at best inconclusive. Many non-vested respondents suggested that it would be appropriate to uprate the threshold, rather than reduce it. I do not necessarily agree, but that was the case—but there is absolutely no evidence of that, which in the current climate will unnerve many people. Therefore, once again, at the last minute, I ask the Minister to withdraw this iniquitous proposal.

**Question put.** That the amendment be made.

**The Committee divided.** Ayes 269, Noes 311.

**Division No. 19**

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Alexander, Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amesbury, Mike  
Antoniacci, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Bardell, Hannah  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackford, Ian  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben

**Kirsty Blackman:** The Minister is concerned that some people might be exploiting a loophole, but as a result, he has decided to disadvantage everybody who is subject to termination as a result of injury to feelings, rather than giving them the benefit of the doubt, which seems pretty unfair to me.

**Mel Stride:** The problem is that one cannot escape the possibility that the employer and the employee, who could both gain from reduced tax, will work together to suggest that there has been an injury to feelings, even when in fact there has not been. How does one prove whether or not there has been an injury to feelings? That is why there is a loophole.

 Amendment 12, tabled by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North, would require a review of how these changes will affect low-income workers. That is unnecessary because only 85% of the payments are below £30,000. As I have explained, the provisions do not affect awards for discrimination at work, for example. We have also maintained the £30,000 income tax exemption. We have considered the impact on low-income workers throughout, and we will continue to do so.

In conclusion, the Government recognise that losing a job is a challenging time, but we must remain vigilant to opportunities for the tax rules to be manipulated. That is why clause 5 sets out a fair and proportionate set of changes that will continue to protect the vast majority of employees. The first £30,000 of a termination payment will remain tax-free, as will the whole of the compensation payment for discrimination during employment. However, where there were opportunities for manipulation, the loopholes must be closed, and they now will be. I therefore urge hon. Members to reject the amendments and agree to clause 5.
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<th>Members Supporting (Ayes)</th>
<th>Members Opposing (Noes)</th>
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<td>Brennan, Kevin</td>
<td>Gibbon, Patricia, Gill, Preet Kaur, Glindon, Mary, Goddard, Mr Roger, Goodman, Helen, Grady, Patrick, Grant, Peter, Gray, Neil, Green, Kate, Greenwood, Lilian, Greenwood, Margaret, Griffith, Nia, Grogan, John, Gwynne, Andrew, Haigh, Louise, Hamilton, Fabian, Hanson, rh David, Hardy, Emma, Harman, rh Ms Harriet, Harris, Carolyn, Hayes, Helen, Hayman, Sue, Healey, rh John, Hendrick, Mr Mark, Hendry, Drew, Hepworth, Mr Stephen, Hill, Mike, Hillier, Meg, Hodgson, Mrs Sharon, Hoey, Kate, Hollem, Kate, Hopkins, Kelvin, Hosie, Stewart, Huq, Raupa, Hussain, Imran, Johnson, Diana, Jones, Darren, Jones, Gerald, Jones, Helen, Jones, Mr Keven, Jones, Sarah, Jones, Susan Elan, Kane, Mike, Kendall, Liz, Khan, Afzal, Killen, Gerard, Kinnock, Stephen, Kyle, Peter, Laird, Lesley, Lake, Ben, Lamb, rh Norman, Lammy, rh Mr David, Lavery, Ian, Law, Chris, Lee, Ms Karen, Leslie, Mr Chris, Lewis, Clive, Lewis, Mr Ivan, Linden, David, Lloyd, Tony, Long Bailey, Rebecca, Lucas, Caroline, Lucas, Ian C., Lynch, Holly, MacNeil, Angus Brendan, Madders, Justin, Mahmood, Mr Khalid, Mahmood, Shabana, Malhotra, Seema, Martin, Sandy, Maskell, Rachael, Matheson, Christian, Mc Nally, John, McCabe, Steve, McDonagh, Siobhain, McDonald, Andy, McDonald, Stuart C., McDonnell, rh John, McFadden, rh Mr Pat, McGinn, Conor, McGovern, Alison, McKinnell, Catherine, McMahon, Jim, McMorris, Anna, Mearns, Ian, Milliband, rh Edward, Monaghan, Carol, Morden, Jessica, Morgan, Stephen, Morris, Grahame, Nandy, Lisa, Newlands, Gavin, Norris, Alex, O'Hara, Brendan, O'Mara, Jared, Osnasanya, Fiona, Onn, Melanie, Onwurah, Chi, Osamar, Kate, Owen, Albert, Peacock, Stephanie, Pearce, Teresa, Pennycook, Matthew, Perkins, Toby, Phillipson, Bridget, Piccador, Laura, Platt, Jo, Pollard, Luke, Pound, Stephen, Powell, Lucy, Qureshi, Yasmin, Rashid, Faisal, Reed, Mr Steve, Reeves, Ellie, Reeves, Rachel, Reynolds, Jonathan, Rimmer, Ms Marie, Robinson, Mr Geoffrey, Rodda, Matt, Rowley, Danielle, Ruane, Chris, Russell-Moyle, Lloyd, Ryan, rh Joan, Saville Roberts, Liz, Shah, Naz, Sheerman, Mr Barry, Sheppard, Tommy, Sherriff, Paula, Shuker, Mr Gavin, Siddiq, Tulip, Skinner, Mr Dennis, Slaughter, Andy, Smith, Ruth, Smith, Cat, Smith, Eleanor, Smith, Laura, Smith, Owen, Smyth, Karin, Snell, Gareth, Sobel, Alex, Spellar, rh John, Starmer, rh Keir, Stephens, Chris, Streeting, Wes, Stringer, Graham, Sweeney, Mr Paul J., Tami, Mark, Thewliss, Alison, Thomas, Gareth, Thomas-Symonds, Nick, Thornberry, rh Emily, Timms, rh Stephen, Turley, Anna, Turner, Karl, Twigg, Stephen, Twist, Liz, Umunna, Chuka, Vaz, rh Keith, Vaz, Valerie, Walker, Thelma, West, Catherine, Western, Matt, Whitehead, Dr Alan, Whitfield, Martin, Whittford, Dr Philippa, Williams, Hywel, Williamson, Chris, Wilson, Phil, Wishart, Peter, Woodcock, John, Yasin, Mohammad, Zeichner, Daniel</td>
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**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Jeff Smith and Thangam Debbonaire

**NOES**
Bebb, Guto, Bellingham, Sir Henry, Benyon, rh Richard, Beresford, Sir Paul, Berry, Jake, Blackman, Bob, Blunt, Crispin, Boles, Nick, Bone, Mr Peter, Bottomley, Sir Peter, Bowie, Andrew, Bradley, Ben, Bradley, rh Karen, Brady, Mr Graham, Brereton, Jack, Bridgen, Andrew
11 OCTOBER 2017

Question accordingly negatived.

Tellers for the Noes:

Craig Whittaker and
Mrs Heather Wheeler
Amendment proposed: 2, page 14, line 15, leave out “different” and insert “higher”.—(Peter Dowd.)

This amendment removes the power for the Treasury to reduce the £30,000 threshold in connection with the taxation of termination payments by regulations.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 272, Noes 312

Division No. 20] [3.20 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Alexander, Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amessbury, Mike  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Bardell, Hannah  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Bennett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Bryant, Chris  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Brown, Lyndon  
Brown, Mr Adrian  
Burdens, Kevin  
Burt, Dawn  
Butler, Julian  
Buxton, Tonia  
Cable, rh Sir Vince  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Cameron, Dr Lisa  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Douglas  
Chapman, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Cherry, Joanna  
Coaker, Vernon  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Cowen, Ronnie  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Sir David  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Craddes, Jon  
Cryer, John  
Cummins, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dakin, Nic  
David, Wayne  
Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
Hill, Mike  
Hillier, Meg  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hoey, Kate  
Holliern, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Hosie, Stewart  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Johnson, Diana  
Jones, Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Helen  
Jones, Mr Kevan  
Jones, Sarah  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Kendall, Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Kilren, Gerard  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Laird, Lesley  
Lake, Ben  
Lammy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Law, Chris  
Lee, Ms Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewis, Clive  
Lewis, Mr Ivan  
Linden, David  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Lynch, Holly  
MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Marsden, Gordon  
Martin, Sandy  
Maskell, Rachael  
Matheson, Christian  
Mc Nally, John  
McCabe, Steve  
McDonagh, Stichbain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
McDonald, Stuart C.  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGinn, Conor  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
McKellin, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
Mearns, Ian  
Miliband, rh Edward  
Monaghan, Carol  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Grahame  
Nandy, Lisa  
Newlands, Gavin  
Norris, Alex  
O'Hara, Brendan  
O'Mara, Jared  
Onasanya, Fiona  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwrarh, Chi  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pearce, Teresa  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Pidcock, Laura  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Pound, Stephen  
Powell, Lucy  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rashid, Faisal  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey  
Roda, Matt  
Rowley, Danielle  
Ruane, Chris  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Ryan, rh Joan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smeeth, Ruth  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Owen  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Starmer, rh Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
Sweeney, Mr Paul J.  
Tami, Mark  
Thelwiss, Alison  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Thomberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Turley, Anna  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma  
Watson, Tom  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Martin  
Whitford, Dr Philippa  
Williams, Hywel
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Mr Ben
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Ferre, Mike
Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, Mr John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Ms Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damien
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Handley, Tom
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard

Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holllingbery, George
Holllinrake, Kevin
Hollóbő, Mr Philip
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Morgan, rh Sir John
Mordaunt, Penny
Moran, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Pannick, John
Perry, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prick, rh Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purvesglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rosyton
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain

Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Penny
Moran, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Pannick, John
Perry, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prick, rh Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purvesglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rosyton
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
3.36 pm

More than two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 12 September).

The Chair put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83D).

Amendment proposed: 4, in clause 5, page 14, leave out lines 27 and 28 and insert—

‘(2) “Injury” in subsection (1) includes—
(a) psychiatric injury, and
(b) injured feelings.”’—(Peter Dowd.)

This amendment explicitly includes (rather than excludes) injured feelings within the definition of “injury” for the purposes of payments which are excluded from the provisions of Chapter 3 of Part 6 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 (payments and benefits on termination of employment).

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 281, Noes 312.

Division No. 21

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amess, Nick
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Keir
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy

Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, rh William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coxon, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flinn, rh Caroline
Fynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, rh Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew

Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holborn, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevin
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Alzard
Killen, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and
Thangam Debbonaire

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bin
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard

NOES

Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Bremeton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair

Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carlingford, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverley, Simon
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dos Santos, Elspeth
Douglas, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Farnes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard

Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herm, Lady
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollóboney, Mr Philip
Hudson, rh Nick
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lowest, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim

11 OCTOBER 2017
Clause 15

**BUSINESS INVESTMENT RELIEF**

[Kirsty Blackman: I beg to move amendment 13, page 22, line 21, leave out “on or after 6 April 2017” and insert “on or after the date on which the Chancellor of the Exchequer lays before the House of Commons a report of the review undertaken under section 809VP of ITA 2007”.

This amendment would provide that the changes in Clause 15 do not have effect until after the Chancellor of the Exchequer has laid before the House of Commons the review provided for in NC3.

The Temporary Chair (Mr George Howarth): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clause stand part.

New clause 1—Review of conditions under which business investment relief is available—

‘(1) Chapter A1 of Part 14 of ITA 2007 (remittance basis) is amended as follows.

(2) After section 809VO (investments made from mixed funds), insert—

“809VP Review of conditions under which business investment relief is available

(1) Within six months of the coming into force of section 15 of the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017, the Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs shall complete a review of the conditions under which business investment relief is available.

(2) For the purposes of this section “the conditions” means—

(a) Condition A as defined in section 809VD,

(b) Condition B as defined in section 809VF.

(3) The review shall make an estimate of the value of the reliefs granted as a result of the conditions in respect of each tax year for which the relief has been available.

(4) The review shall make an estimate of the change in the value of the reliefs granted as a result of—

(a) changes to the conditions relating to eligible hybrid companies,

(b) changes to the periods specified in sections 809VD and 809VH,

(c) changes to the grace period in section 809VJ.

(5) The review shall make an assessment of the effectiveness of the conditions in relation to the stated policy aims of the Government in relation to business investment relief.

(6) The review shall prepare an analysis of the characteristics of beneficiaries of reliefs having particular regard to—

(a) income distribution,

(b) gender and other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010,

(c) domicile (including deemed domicile).

(7) A report of the review under this section shall be laid before the House of Commons within one calendar month of its completion.”.”

This new clause requires HMRC to carry out a review of the conditions under which business investment relief is available, including estimates of the value of the reliefs (before and after the changes proposed in this Bill) and an analysis of the characteristics of those using the relief, including their domicile status.

New clause 3—Review of the efficacy of the conditions for business investment relief—

‘(1) Chapter A1 of Part 14 of ITA 2007 (remittance basis) is amended as follows.

(2) After section 809VO (investments made from mixed funds), insert—

“809VP Review of efficacy of the conditions for business investment relief..."
Within two months of Royal Assent to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017, the Commissioners for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs shall complete a review of the impact of the conditions for business investment relief in encouraging investment in the UK.

The review shall make an estimate of additional investment as a result of the condition for business investment relief—

(a) prior to Royal Assent being given to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017, and

(b) if the changes to those conditions in section 15 of the Finance (No. 2) Act were brought into force.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay the report of this review before the House of Commons.

This new clause requires HMRC to carry out a review of efficacy of the conditions under which business investment relief is available and the Chancellor to lay it before the House of Commons.

Kirsty Blackman: I appreciate having the opportunity to speak in this second part of our debate on the Finance Bill.

The matter in hand now has been discussed a number of times over the past few months, specifically around business investment relief. Some aspects of it were discussed while tackling the Ways and Means resolutions and on Second Reading. We are still not clear what impact this will have; the Government have still not told us. An overview of tax legislation was produced at the tail end of last year, when the Bill was first in draft form. It said there was likely to be a negligible impact on the public finances, but that does not explain what is actually going to happen. It also says that between 200 and 400 individuals a year benefit from business investment relief, but again that does not really explain the impact of this relief.

We do know, however, that everybody who benefits from the relief is a non-dom. The Government claim that they are changing the way non-doms are considered from the relief or from non-doms in general? We asked for those figures in writing from the Government to provide us with more data. We have asked the Government for that figure on a number of occasions, this is the first time it has been forthcoming.

I am very pleased that it is and that we can have a reasonable discussion about whether we should increase the ability of people from other countries to come under this.

I did not want to talk for a very long time, because we have already had a number of votes and two hours of debate on the Bill. As I said, the House has spent an incredible amount of time on this, and it probably should not have. The Labour party has tabled a new clause along similar lines to the new clause tabled by the Scottish National party.

Vicky Ford: As I understand it, business investment relief ensures that overseas funds can be invested in the UK. It has resulted in £1.6 billion being invested in the UK—not a small amount of money. Of course it affects overseas people because it is overseas money that we want to be invested here. I do not understand the hon. Lady’s complaint about the relief only affecting overseas people—of course it does, because it is to introduce them.

Kirsty Blackman: My complaint was about the fact that people are being allowed to not pay tax on stuff they are doing in this country. My complaint is that the Government do not mention anything to do with £1.6 billion and that the overview of tax legislation put forward in December last year does not mention £1.6 billion. Despite our asking the Government for that figure on a number of occasions, this is the first time it has been forthcoming. I am very pleased that it is and that we can have a reasonable discussion about whether we should increase the ability of people from other countries to come under this.

I am very glad that those figures are there, but sadly, when we asked about them in September during our discussion on the Bill, after their production, they were not mentioned. I appreciate that they are being brought up now—that is great—but they were not brought up then.

As I said, I do not want to take up much of the Committee’s time discussing this matter. We have asked the Government to provide us with more data. We have also asked them to provide data on what effect they think this change will have on the amount of investment coming in. We would very much like to see that.
Anneliese Dodds: I will get straight to the point. Members will not be surprised to hear that many of my concerns have already been raised by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). Labour Members have expressed a number of concerns many times about the extension and scope of business investment relief, to no avail. We find it very concerning that in a context where the current Government have borrowed more than any Labour Government ever have, our Treasury is intentionally depriving itself of revenue. That might be acceptable if the deprivation served to boost our economy, but we have no evidence of any positive impact from business investment relief.

Government Members have stated that they know the raw figure for how much has been invested through this relief. That is correct. We kept calling for that, and finally, at the last minute before we started debating the Bill after the summer recess, we got some figures. They were rounded up to the nearest hundred, and when we are talking of only about 400 people, it is rather strange not to have more granularity.

That is just the figure for the overall amount that has gone through this relief. We have not been told which sectors the investment directed through this relief goes into. We have no clarity about whether, for example, funds invested through this relief might have contributed to the overheating of the British property market in high-cost areas, and we have not received any assurances that the funds going through this relief will help to promote the increase in business and human capital formation that we so desperately need, given Britain’s falling productivity.

The Government’s impact assessment published when this relief was brought in said that it would have a negligible impact on economic development. This is not a relief that has a proven beneficial impact. Until the Government accept our proposals and agree at least to review the operation of the relief, I will remain unpersuaded that its extension does anything other than offer yet another concession to non-doms and provide even greater scope for tax advisers to indicate how UK taxes can be avoided. That is why the new clauses call for a review.

4 pm

From the Opposition’s perspective, the changes form part of a piece that, along with the other patchwork of measures in the Bill, could lead to pinching from sacked workers instead of root-and-branch reform of the non-dom system. They will fuel a race to the bottom on corporation tax, and there has been some confusion over the figures. Members who have looked into the matter will know that the Government’s tax gap calculation contains a growing element of error, which is a concern given the forthcoming closure of HMRC offices. The figure does not cover tax avoidance resulting from profit shifting, on which the Opposition have a strong record.

To return to our previous discussion and the points made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), measures to deliver change on an international level have been blocked by the Government.

Mr Harper: The hon. Lady made a relevant point in the previous debate that I did not mention at the time. Some of the things that we had to deal with early in the last but one Parliament involved multinational tax arrangements that were put in place under the previous Labour Government. We did our best to get at least some money from those multinationals. It was not enough, but we did at least move things in the right direction. Profit shifting can only be dealt with internationally by agreement. If we do not do that, we will not make any progress. As I said in the previous debate, we are leading that international effort, which did not happen under the Labour Government.

Anneliese Dodds: I am sorry, but it is not the case that Governments are completely unable to do anything unilaterally to prevent profit shifting. They can, for example, decide whether to execute secret sweetheart deals with large multinationals through their tax authorities, or they can decide to be transparent.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Is the hon. Lady seriously suggesting that, under a Labour Government, HMRC would never negotiate with a company over its tax bill?

Anneliese Dodds: I referred to secret sweetheart deals, of which the experience in this country has been negative. The problem is with transparency. It is important to have an open tax system that allows for discussion, but many commentators would suggest that the relationship between some of the tax authorities and some of the companies they deal with is too cosy. The problems here are not to the same extent as those in many other countries, but we need to do something when the revenue from companies, particularly those focusing on intangibles, is going down.

One way to do that is to work with other nations, but we have again seen many negative developments in that area. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean suggested that that was uniquely down to measures promoting a particular rate of tax, but that does not bear witness to what occurred. For example, the Government pushed strongly to prevent trusts from being included in registers of beneficial ownership. That is not about tax rates; it is about transparency. Again, when Conservative MEPs voted against country-by-country reporting, that was not about tax rates; it was about transparency.

Many of the most significant developments to remove harmful tax arrangements, particularly those exploited by multinational companies, occurred under Dawn Primarolo, who was a Labour representative when she chaired the multinational code of conduct group in which dozens of harmful tax practices were identified and removed. Labour therefore has a clear and strong record in dealing with these matters.

The Opposition will do everything we can to remove the gaping loopholes that still exist in the Bill, to toughen measures against aggressive tax avoidance and to prevent the burden being placed on some of the biggest casualties of austerity: those workers who have been made redundant. I hope that the Government will pay heed. In the interests of the British economy, they need to.
Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): One of the strange anomalies in our tax system over the years has been the framework constructed to enable non-doms to avoid paying tax in the United Kingdom. The outdated concept of tax exemption for non-doms, which I understand dates back to 1799, is not fit for purpose in the 21st century. It takes no account of the mobility of the rich and their ability to shift wealth across jurisdictions at the click of a button and of the fact that some non-doms can use tax havens to channel their income overseas so that they can avoid paying tax.

Let us be clear that the idea that the place of birth of a wealthy individual’s parents should affect how much tax they pay in the United Kingdom is nonsensical. The fact that the UK Government should play along with that by setting various inducements in the form of remittance charges of between £30,000 and £90,000 or via business investment relief is also very concerning, as is the potential lack of scrutiny into the non-doms’ affairs and background.

In 2014-15, 84,500 non-doms living in the UK paid the UK Government £9 billion in tax, or a total of £105,000 each. Considering the size of the wealth of some non-doms this is very good business indeed, as some offshore money is brought in to the UK for investment purposes and taxed at these knockdown rates but much of it will remain outside UK jurisdiction. The generous tax breaks given to non-doms do not apply to other UK residents and take for granted the many benefits of life in the UK and of London as a financial capital. Why would non-doms who have lived in the UK for more than a decade, who perhaps send their kids to schools in the UK, carry out business in the UK and own property here, need further incentives via tax breaks to invest here? There would be an outcry if we gave non-doms a reduced rate of income tax or capital gains tax that was not available to ordinary UK tax payers, so why are we carrying on with this charade right now? The USA makes sure that residents pay tax on their worldwide income and seems to have little problem attracting people to New York.

A good business investment is a good business investment whether it gets tax relief or not, and let us not kid ourselves that the sweetener of business interest relief is anything more than a sugar-coated inducement for non-doms who have already made their money. It is clear that stringent tests are not even done to assess whether someone applying for non-dom status meets the right criteria.

People who are temporarily resident in the UK pay tax on what they earn in the UK, as do permanent UK residents. Everyone else should pay tax on their worldwide income. It cannot be fair to be giving better treatment to some people who have lived in the UK for most if not all their lives but who, because of some convenient accident, can elect how much tax they can be liable for. Any changes to this loophole are of course welcome.

Let me turn to the amendment and new clause tabled by the Scottish National party. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) outlined, amendment 13 and new clause 3 would delay the commencement of these provisions until the Government had laid before the House a review of the efficacy of the conditions for BIR. I can be clear that the Government are confident of the effectiveness of this scheme. Investment using BIR increased from £197 million in 2012-13 to £837 million in 2014-15. In only three years, that has meant total investments of more than £1.6 billion in our economy since the scheme was first introduced.

Kirsty Blackman: I would very much appreciate it if the Treasury would commit to publishing that information and details of the sectors in which the money has been invested. If it does that, we will all be much happier, across the House.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I will come on to deal with the information that the Treasury is already publishing, which is very comprehensive.
Mel Stride

As I was saying, that includes investment in the hospitality and energy sectors, and in many different types of businesses, including small and medium-sized ones. It includes investment in manufacturing and pharmaceutical science businesses in the Midlands and north of England, and a £3 million investment in aerospace businesses in the north-west of England. As I outlined earlier, the independent OBR has certified that these changes do not have any cost to the Exchequer. In other words, this is money coming to this country which would not otherwise have done so. I am sure that these are investments in our country that the whole House wants to see—investment in British businesses right across the country. I therefore urge Members to reject new clause 3 and amendment 13.

Let me also address new clause 1, tabled by the official Opposition. In a similar vein to new clause 3, it would require the Government to review the conditions under which BIR is available, including estimates of the value of the relief and an analysis of the characteristics of those using it. Such a review is wholly unnecessary, as Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs publishes much of this information already. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) pointed out, in August HMRC published official statistics on non-domiciled taxpayers in the UK, which includes a commentary document and tables. This publication contains statistics on the number of individuals who are non-domiciled, and on the total income tax, capital gains tax and national insurance contributions of the non-domiciled population. Moreover, it includes information on the current number of investments and the amount invested in the UK by non-domiciled individuals using business investment relief.

To provide the report, HMRC uses information provided by taxpayers through the self-assessment process. It is impossible to determine from an individual’s tax return whether or not they have characteristics that are protected under the Equality Act. HMRC does not have the capacity or the resource to acquire such information, so it would be unduly burdensome to place on HMRC a statutory obligation that it would be incapable of meeting. For those reasons, I urge Members to reject the new clause.

4.15 pm

To conclude, the clause builds on the notable success of the business investment relief scheme by expanding its scope, and it will bring more money into our country. I therefore call on Members to reject the new clauses and the amendment and to agree to clause 15.

Kirsty Blackman: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

REVIEW OF CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH BUSINESS INVESTMENT RELIEF IS AVAILABLE

(1) Chapter A1 of Part 14 of ITA 2007 (remittance basis) is amended as follows.

(2) After section 809VO insert—

“809VP Review of conditions under which business investment relief is available

(1) Within six months of the coming into force of section 15 of the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017, the Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs shall complete a review of the conditions under which business investment relief is available.

(2) For the purposes of this section “the conditions” means—

(a) Condition A as defined in section 809VD,

(b) Condition B as defined in section 809VF.

(3) The review shall make an estimate of the value of the relief granted as a result of the conditions in respect of each tax year for which the relief has been available.

(4) The review shall make an estimate of the change in the value of the relief granted as a result of—

(a) changes to the conditions relating to eligible hybrid companies,

(b) changes to the periods specified in sections 809VD and 809VH,

(c) changes to the grace period in section 809VJ.

(5) The review shall make an assessment of the effectiveness of the conditions in relation to the stated policy aims of the Government in relation to business investment relief.

(6) The review shall prepare an analysis of the characteristics of beneficiaries of reliefs having particular regard to—

(a) income distribution,

(b) gender and other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010,

(c) domicile (including deemed domicile).

(7) A report of the review under this section shall be laid before the House of Commons within one calendar month of its completion.”

Anneliese Dodds: This new clause requires HMRC to carry out a review of the conditions under which business investment relief is available, including estimates of the value of the reliefs (before and after the changes proposed in this Bill) and an analysis of the characteristics of those using the relief, including their domicile status.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 274, Noes 309.

Division No. 22

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Bettes, Mr Clive
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burdens, Richard
Burton, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Caddy, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carey, rh Mr Alistair
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Chapman, Douglas
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**Question accordingly negatived.**
Clause 25

TRADING PROFITS TAXABLE AT THE NORTHERN IRELAND RATE

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Temporary Chair (Mr George Howarth) With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 2—Review of changes to chargeability of trading profits to corporation tax at Northern Ireland rate—

“(1) CTA 2010 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 357WH (Allocation of Northern Ireland profits etc of firm to company), insert—

‘357WI  Review of changes to chargeability of trading profits to corporation tax at Northern Ireland rate

(1) As soon as practicable after the completion of the first financial year in respect of which the Northern Ireland rate is set by the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with the provisions of section 357IA, the Commissioners for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs shall complete a review of the effects of the changes to chargeability of trading profits to corporation tax at the Northern Ireland rate made in Schedule 7 to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017.

(2) A review under this section shall consider in particular the effect of those changes on the extent to which companies are based in—

(a) Northern Ireland, and
(b) Great Britain.

(3) A review under this section shall also consider the effect of those changes on the extent to which the profits or losses of companies and firms are Northern Ireland profits or losses.

(4) A review under this section shall also consider the effect on employment in—

(a) Northern Ireland, and
(b) Great Britain.

(5) A report of the review under this section shall be laid before the House of Commons within one calendar month of its completion.”

This new clause requires HMRC to carry out a review after the first year of operation of the Northern Ireland rate of the effect of the changes in Schedule 7 on the location of companies in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain, the extent to which trading profits and losses are treated as subject to the Northern Ireland rate and on employment in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain.

4.30 pm

Mel Stride: As with my contributions earlier this afternoon, I will set out why the Government have included this measure in the Bill, before turning to new clause 2.

Clause 25 and schedule 7 make amendments to the Northern Ireland corporation tax regime. The Government are committed to supporting growth across all parts of the UK. Creating a stronger Northern Ireland economy will benefit the entire United Kingdom.

Northern Ireland faces a unique set of circumstances and challenges. That was why, in 2015, this House legislated to devolve corporation tax rate-setting powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly, subject to commencement regulations. The introduction of the regime received nearly unanimous support from Northern Ireland’s political leaders and business community. The rate-setting powers given to the Northern Ireland Assembly are another tool to help to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy by revitalising private enterprise and attracting new investment.

This clause and schedule amend the regime to allow all small companies with trading activity in Northern Ireland the opportunity to benefit from future changes in the Northern Ireland corporation tax rate. They also make changes to ensure that the regime is robust against abuse and ready for commencement once a restored Northern Ireland Executive demonstrate that their finances are on a sustainable footing.

It may help the House if I set out how the devolved rate regime has been designed to focus on incentivising genuine investment in Northern Ireland. The regime was set out in the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Act 2015.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Minister is making a powerful case as to why the devolution of corporation tax is a good thing for the Northern Ireland economy, but should the same case not apply to Wales and Scotland, because it creates an imbalance if one devolved Government have a set of fiscal powers that the other devolved Governments do not have?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but there is, of course, one key distinction between Wales and Northern Ireland, and that is that Northern Ireland has a land border with the Republic of Ireland, which has a corporation tax rate of just 12.5%. It is particularly important in that context that we make these provisions.

Jonathan Edwards: The Minister makes a fair point about the land border, but large parts of Wales, including my part of Wales—the west of Wales—have a sea border with the Republic of Ireland.

Mel Stride: I do not think it is within the scope of this particular clause to start getting too much into the devolutionary settlement for Wales.

The regime was set out in the 2015 Act, which, subject to commencement regulations, will devolve corporation tax rate-setting powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Government have committed to working with an incoming Northern Ireland Executive on options for commencement, including on timing and adjustments to the Northern Ireland Executive block grant to reflect tax revenues forgone by the UK Government.

There are two key features to the regime’s design. First, the devolved rate will apply only to a company’s trading profits; investment activities, which are highly mobile, are not in scope. Secondly, the Act requires large companies with a substantial trading presence in Northern Ireland to calculate their Northern Ireland profits separately from the rest of their profits. That calculation must follow internationally accepted principles for attributing cross-border profits. Broadly, that means that companies with profits generated in different tax jurisdictions must calculate their branch profits as though each branch were an independent entity. These profit attribution rules are important to make sure the regime works as intended.

An SME with 75% or more of employment time and cost in Northern Ireland would have all its trading profit taxed at the Northern Ireland corporation tax rate. An SME below the 75% threshold would have all its trading profits, including those generated in Northern Ireland, taxed at the UK corporation tax rate.
Ian Paisley: (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister accept that the introduction of this will allow for the rebalancing of the Northern Ireland economy in a very beneficial way? It will allow us to generate more investment and, potentially, more private sector jobs. Of course, this corporation tax will not apply to the financial service sector, so it will not wrongly attract businesses away to Northern Ireland.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes the very powerful point that this is not about brass-plating and shifting profits; it is about generating growth in a very important part of the United Kingdom.

Since we legislated in 2015, we have heard that some small businesses want the option to benefit from the Northern Ireland corporation tax rate on the proportion of their profits generated by trading activity in Northern Ireland. The changes made by clause 25 will give all SMEs trading in Northern Ireland the potential to benefit from the devolved rate, should they choose to do so. That will be done without watering down the rules, and it will ensure that the regime is focused on incentivising genuine economic activity in Northern Ireland. Like large companies, those SMEs that opt to take advantage of this measure will be required to calculate their Northern Ireland profits according to well-established principles. These changes deliver a fair outcome for small companies.

Let me be clear that under these rules a company’s trading profits will be taxed at the Northern Ireland rate only if the company has a substantial physical presence in Northern Ireland and if that is where the economic activity that generates the profit takes place.

New clause 2 would require HMRC to conduct a review of the impact of the changes in schedule 7 on the corporation tax system, the location of companies and the levels of employment across Northern Ireland and Great Britain. A mandated formal review is not an appropriate response to a regime that has been carefully designed to be robust in relation to avoidance and abuse, and one that, as I have said, builds on tried and tested rules when doing so. As with all policies, the Government will monitor the regime closely once it is commenced to ensure that it operates as intended. I urge the Opposition not to press the new clause.

Ian Paisley: Does the Minister accept that those who espouse the peace process also want to see an economic dividend post that process? Therefore, why would anyone want to vote against something that allows that economic dividend, building upon the peace in Northern Ireland?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. This is about strengthening Northern Ireland’s economy, society and infrastructure, to the end that we all seek, which is a stronger and more united Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, these provisions include changes that will ensure that the regime is robust against abuse, in order to maintain the regime’s focus on encouraging genuine additional economic activity in Northern Ireland.

Jonathan Reynolds: (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Financial Secretary for introducing this group. This is an important debate, not only for the future of Northern Ireland, but for this country’s overall approach to taxation and devolution.

We know—we have discussed it frequently throughout this process—that our country faces a substantial tax gap. The official estimate of the UK’s tax gap is at least £36 billion, up from £33 billion in 2010, but that is at best a conservative estimate, given that the Government’s definition of the tax gap excludes convoluted corporate structures, which we know are used by multinationals to minimise their tax liabilities. The view that the tax gap is underestimated is shared by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Public Accounts Committee. I think that we all agree that that £36 billion, and possibly more, is money that should be used to fund our public services, and that everybody should pay their fair share.

Corporation tax is an important part of the UK’s tax revenue. In 2016-17, HMRC collected £56 billion in corporation tax receipts. Although it is important that we keep the rate competitive, particularly in the light of the UK’s exit from the European Union, it is worth noting that we face a law of diminishing returns in this regard. At 19%, the UK’s corporation tax rate is already one of the lowest in Europe. We should be confident that we do not need to plunge the rate to rock bottom in order to encourage businesses to invest and domicile here. The UK plays host to a wealth of resources that enable it to be globally competitive, including our legal system, our language, our time zone, our infrastructure, our regulatory bodies and, most of all, our people.

It is equally important that Northern Ireland is equipped with the tools to compete in that international landscape, as has been brought to the fore recently with the punitive tariffs aimed at Bombardier in the United States. As the Financial Secretary has explained, the corporation tax rate has already been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, through the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Act 2015. Now that that legislation has been decided, it is for Northern Ireland’s politicians to work together and use those powers to see where the line lies between a lower tax rate and the broader appeal of Northern Ireland as a business destination. At present, the decision has been that 12.5% best achieves those ends. It is not my intention to revisit those arguments today, and nor would it be appropriate to do so, given the reasons already outlined.

What is relevant, and the reason Labour has proposed new clause 2, is the relationship between that rate and the rest of the UK. The gap between 12.5% and 19% represents a significant potential for arbitrage between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Some businesses might base their decisions on where to domicile purely with regard to taxation, and that is a risk that we accept—indeed, we already compete with the rest of Europe on that basis. Our concern is that the Government are introducing measures that could be exploited by companies that will seek to abuse the proximity between Northern Ireland and the UK simply to divert profits and benefit from a lower tax regime, which would benefit neither the UK nor Northern Ireland.

Mr Gregory Campbell: (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman spoke a few moments ago about the importance of competitiveness throughout Europe. Does he agree that the argument that he is making runs counter to the attempts to make Northern Ireland’s private sector business more competitive, when we have a difficult relationship with the Irish Republic and its very low corporation tax, which he has alluded to?
Jonathan Reynolds: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I would not agree with his characterisation of the situation. We are making the case that our amendment will really benefit Northern Ireland, because if the relationship was abused and firms sought to benefit from the lower rate without investing in Northern Irish jobs or business production, that would surely defeat the purpose of having a lower corporation tax rate—that is the sole point of trying to devolve the rate to Northern Ireland. Our concern is that loosening the rules could lead to brass-plating, where UK businesses are given a loophole that allows them to domicile their businesses in lower-tax jurisdictions while they continue, in reality, to operate in the UK.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman recognises that the one sector in which the proposals might be abused, the financial services sector, is specifically precluded from taking advantage of them. Could he provide the House with an example of a sector that he thinks would abuse the rules?

Jonathan Reynolds: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s assertion that only the financial services sector will seek to do that. We are proposing a very reasonable review of the measure after one year, and he has nothing to fear from such an amendment.

Labour, more than any other party in this House, has consistently made the case for a level playing field between larger and smaller businesses, but a level playing field cannot be simply an equal race to the bottom in which smaller businesses are given the same tax avoidance opportunities as larger ones. That is not to say that the rule changes will necessarily lead to a flight of small and medium-sized enterprises rushing to domicile in Northern Ireland. We note that the majority of enterprises operating in the UK are honest and committed to paying their fair share. We should be vocal in praise of that contribution and its role in making the UK economy a success. However, opening what could become a loophole is significant, and it is critical that we protect against unforeseen consequences.

At this stage we have little indication of the potential impact of this measure, because behavioural effects are notoriously unpredictable to model. For that reason, we have tabled an amendment that calls on the Government to review the measure as soon as is practicable after the completion of the first financial year in which it has been fully in force. The report of that review would be presented to the House within one month. That would allow us to understand fully the impact of chargeability, see how companies are responding and react accordingly if the measure is being treated as a loophole. In turn, if evidence shows that the measure is forging stronger business links between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and that the impact to the Exchequer is minimal, at least a proper assessment will have been made.

We are at a critical time when the UK economy simply cannot afford to lose revenue to tax avoidance. We have heard in the Chamber many times the arguments about why it makes little sense to drop corporation tax rates to below European averages. To do so betrays a lack of confidence in the many attractions of the UK as a domicile for ambitious companies that seek to grow their businesses. We should not be compounding revenue loss by writing a back door to even lower corporation tax rates without a framework in place to assess the impact properly.

Jonathan Edwards: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that one of the biggest economic challenges that we face is the huge and gross geographical wealth inequality within the British state. Is the Labour position that fiscal devolution has no part to play in the strategy for dealing with geographical wealth inequalities?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman is not correct in that assessment. I certainly agree with him that regional disparity in the UK is one of the principal economic challenges that we face, but I do not agree that the solution is a race to the bottom in corporation tax rates between different parts of the UK. That would be neither effective nor the right way forward, and it would almost certainly fail to address the problems that he raises.

I put it to the House that new clause 2 is a sensible, pragmatic and effective proposal to deliver objectives that are widely shared by Members from all parts of the House: a prosperous Northern Ireland, an effective partnership across the nations of this country and a competitive UK with strong public finances supporting quality public services.

4.45 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, I welcome the proposal in the Finance Bill, which adds to the previous decision about devolving corporation tax to Northern Ireland and giving us autonomy to make decisions about what the appropriate level may be.

I am a bit bemused by new clause 2. The argument is that devolving corporation tax to Northern Ireland and our having a different rate will somehow or other open the door to abuse. That objection could of course have been made, and more appropriately made, when the decision was made to devolve the tax in the first place. If it is open to abuse, it will create the kind of problems described by the shadow Minister, but if that were the case, I cannot understand why these issues were not raised at the time we voted on the principle of devolution. I suspect this is more to do with the fact that the Labour party is opposed to any reduction in corporation tax.

Let me address a couple of the points that have been made about extending this to small and medium-sized enterprises. The Minister made it quite clear that the criteria are, first, that they have to have a physical presence in Northern Ireland; and, secondly, that they have to register profits commensurate with the activities they engage in in Northern Ireland. That of course will have to be shown—by accounts, by employment, by the physical infrastructure that such a business would have in Northern Ireland—so there are already safeguards anyway. It can be measured whether an SME is simply moving paper money to register profits in Northern Ireland, or whether it is creating genuine jobs.

The biggest safeguard will be the decisions made by the Executive in Northern Ireland—if, indeed, an Executive is ever up and running again in Northern Ireland. We hope there will be, but that is one of the problems at the moment. It is not in the interests of the Northern Ireland Government to allow the situation that has been described by the Labour spokesman, for the simple reason that the payment for the devolution of corporation tax comes from the block grant. If we allow companies simply to migrate their business to Northern Ireland, register their accounts in Northern Ireland and declare their profits in Northern Ireland, but they do not actually
create any physical activity in Northern Ireland, we will have to pay the amount of tax lost from the block grant. There will be no better policeman or policewoman of this than the Northern Ireland Executive themselves.

The review asked for—if there is any point in a review after a year—is therefore superfluous. First, there is the evidence that the company has to produce, and then there will be the scrutiny of HMRC. When we negotiated the devolution of corporation tax, compliance costs were built in, because of the additional scrutiny. It will also be in the interests of the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that the system is not abused. For all those reasons, I believe that the new clause is superfluous. It is not needed, and we will therefore vote against it.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I want to raise one additional point. My hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) has set out very well a number of our concerns about the proposed new clause. We have looked at this issue in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I had the privilege of being the Chairperson of the Finance Committee when we considered the detail of it. We listened to concerns from small business and to those outlined by the Opposition spokesperson, but the key objective is to attract new business and jobs to the UK. We do not necessarily want movement from the rest of the UK to Northern Ireland. This is about foreign direct investment, trying to create new jobs and contributing positively to the economy of Northern Ireland and of the UK.

In Northern Ireland, we have looked at this issue for many years. It has been scrutinised by committees. We have had a range of consultants and others look at the detail of the proposal because we want it to work. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim said, we do not want it to be simply an exercise in brass-plating or anything like that. We want jobs, employment and further investment in Northern Ireland.

One of the big issues in terms of the movement and type of jobs we want is certainty. Certainty is essential if we are to get commitment from companies—hopefully, big companies—to move into the UK for the first time and to invest in plant and staff recruitment. The proposal in new clause 2 to have a review after 12 months will create uncertainty. What international business would look at the UK and invest in plant, employees and recruitment when one of the big incentives to moving—the lower corporation tax rate—could be removed following a review after just 12 months? It is essential that we remain positive about the measure and have certainty about it. I reiterate: we want new jobs for the UK, and we want them in Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 25 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 2

Review of changes to chargeability of trading profits to Corporation Tax at Northern Ireland rate

(1) As soon as practicable after the completion of the first financial year in respect of which the Northern Ireland rate is set by the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with the provisions of section 3571A, the Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs shall complete a review of the effects of the changes to chargeability of trading profits to Corporation Tax at the Northern Ireland rate made in Schedule 7 to the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017.

(2) A review under this section shall consider in particular the effect of those changes on the extent to which companies are Northern Ireland, and

(a) Northern Ireland, and
(b) Great Britain.

(3) A review under this section shall also consider the effect of those changes on the extent to which the profits or losses of companies and firms are Northern Ireland profits or losses.

(4) A review under this section shall also consider the effect on employment in—

(a) Northern Ireland, and
(b) Great Britain.

(5) A report of the review under this section shall be laid before the House of Commons within one calendar month of its completion.” —(Jonathan Reynolds.)

This new clause requires HMRC to carry out a review after the first year of operation of the Northern Ireland rate of the effect of the changes in Schedule 7 on the location of companies in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain, the extent to which trading profits and losses are treated as subject to the Northern Ireland rate and on employment in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put. That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 231, Noes 308.

Division No. 23

[4.51 pm]

AYES

| ABBOTT, RH MS DIANE | COAKER, VERNON |
| ALEXANDER, HEIDI | COFFEE, ANN |
| ALI, RUSHANARA | COOPER, JULIE |
| ALLIN-KHAN, DR ROSENA | COOPER, ROSIE |
| AMESBURY, MIKE | COOPER, RH YVETTE |
| ANTONIAZZI, TONIA | CORBYN, RH JEREMY |
| ASHWORTH, JONATHAN | COYLE, NEIL |
| AUSTIN, IAN | CRAUSBY, SIR DAVID |
| BAILEY, MR ADRIAN | CRESSY, STELLA |
| BARRON, RH SIR KEVIN | CRUDDAS, JON |
| BECKETT, RH MARGARET | CRYER, JOHN |
| BERGER, LUCIANA | CUMMINS, JUDITH |
| BETTS, MR CLIVE | CUNNINGHAM, ALEX |
| BLACKMAN-WOODS, DR ROBERTA | CUNNINGHAM, MR JIM |
| BLOMFIELD, PAUL | DAKIN, NIC |
| BRABIN, TRACY | DAVID, WAYNE |
| BRADSHAW, RH MR BEN | DE CORDOVA, MARSHA |
| BRENMAN, KEVIN | DE PIERO, GLORIA |
| BROWN, LYN | DENT, EMMA |
| BROWN, RH MR NICHOLAS | DHESI, MR TAMMARJEET SINGH |
| BRYANT, CHRIS | DODDS, ANNELIESE |
| BUCK, MS KAREN | DOUGHTY, STEPHEN |
| BURDEN, RICHARD | Dowd, Peter |
| BURGON, RICHARD | Drew, Dr David |
| BUTLER, DAWN | DUFFIELD, ROSIE |
| CABLE, RH SIR VINCE | Eagle, Ms Angela |
| CADBURY, RUTH | Eagle, Maria |
| CAMPBELL, RH MR ALAN | EFFORD, OLIVE |
| CAMPBELL, RH MR RONNIE | ELLIOTT, JULIE |
| CARDDEN, DAN | ELLMAN, MRS LOUISE |
| CARMICHAEL, RH MR ALISTAIR | Champion, Sarah |

Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bamboos
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Rh Yvette
Corbyn, Rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Cressy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammarjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Olive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Tellers for the Ayes: Jeff Smith and Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyel-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Edwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Sechard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons

Declares that the Consumer Rights Act of 2015 does not do

enough to protect consumers against rogue traders who do not

comply with the terms of the Act; further that the change to the

Act in 2015, which gives consumers the right to reject goods

and further that currently, consumers cannot take any action

against companies who do not participate in the Consumer

Ombudsman scheme, and this leaves the consumer with the

laborious task, if the company will not co-operate, of having to

take a small claims action in court.

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Drawn by Mrs Heather Wheeler—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I ask Members to leave the Chamber quietly. I am struggling to hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying.

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comply with the terms of the Act; further that the change to the

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and further that currently, consumers cannot take any action

against companies who do not participate in the Consumer

Ombudsman scheme, and this leaves the consumer with the

laborious task, if the company will not co-operate, of having to

take a small claims action in court.

As I was saying, the petition arises from a problem experienced by my constituent Mrs Johnston with a

three-piece suite. The terms of the petition are fairly

specific and to review the terms of the Act, to make membership of a

Consumer Rights Committee mandatory for companies adding a

warning to their goods or services indicates consumer detriment,

and to ensure better protection for consumers; further asks the

Government to review the Consumer Rights Act (2015)

and ordered to lie on the Table.

PETITIONS

Consumer Rights

5.7 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition relating to consumer rights.

The petition stems from a problem that a constituent of mine—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I ask Members to leave the Chamber quietly. I am struggling to hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying.

Martyn Day: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

As I was saying, the petition arises from a problem experienced by my constituent Mrs Johnston with a firm called R & J Leather, of Uddingston, in purchasing a three-piece suite. The terms of the petition are fairly self-explanatory. It states:

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk, Declares that the Consumer Rights Act of 2015 does not do enough to protect consumers against rogue traders who do not comply with the terms of the Act; further that the change to the Act in 2015, which gives consumers the right to reject goods within 30 days, which are not as described or faulty, is unenforceable; and further that currently, consumers cannot take any action against companies who do not participate in the Consumer Ombudsman scheme, and this leaves the consumer with the laborious task, if the company will not co-operate, of having to take a small claims action in court.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review the Consumer Rights Act (2015) to ensure better protection for consumers; further asks the Government to review the terms of the Act, to make membership of a
professional body for traders compulsory; and further that this action would allow consumers the ability to pursue a complaint with the Consumer Ombudsman.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Myanmar’s Muslim Ethnic Minority

5.9 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I want to praise the work that the Bangladesh Welfare Association in North Lincolnshire does in the community, and also to thank the association for co-ordinating the petition and bringing it to me. The petition states:

The petition of residents of Scunthorpe County Constituency,
Declares that urgent action should be taken to stop the violence against Myanmar’s Muslim ethnic minority, the Rohingya including genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity; and further declares that the petitioners believe Rohingya Muslims are not recognised as citizens in Myanmar.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to issue an urgent statement calling for an immediate end to all violence in Myanmar; further calling for immediate entry aid into Myanmar; and further requests that the House of Commons urge the Government to reach out to State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi to recognise the Rohingya Muslim community as citizens and grant legal status.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to introduce this Adjournment debate and to have two hours and 20 minutes in which to discuss this important matter.

I would like to set out a bit of the context around my request for this debate. During the summer, a league table of vice-chancellors’ pay was published, showing that the average pay of a university vice-chancellor was somewhere in the region of £280,000 a year. That struck me as a large sum of money, particularly in the current atmosphere of relative austerity. I was particularly upset to notice that the vice-chancellor of my own local university, the University of Bath, a non-Russell Group, middle-ranking university, should be right at the top of that league table, in pole position at No. 1, on £451,000 a year, plus a very generous package.

Since being elected in 2001, I have been an ex officio member of Bath University’s court. I confess that it does not involve me in a great deal of hard work, but nevertheless I have been very pleased to be associated with Bath University, which—let me be absolutely clear—is a good institute of higher education that has done exceptionally well over the past several years. However, it seemed to me that I could no longer be part of the governance of Bath university, in however much a titular capacity, while its remuneration committee showed such an error of judgment as it displayed on this occasion, hence my action over the summer.

Since then, I have been inundated with correspondence from all sorts of people—not only constituents, but young people who are burdened with debt, and university lecturers, particularly those working at the University of Bath—in support of the action I took, and in some cases providing me with very long accounts about why it was right that we should look at restraining this part of public sector expenditure. I found those arguments to be compelling.

I very much welcome recent Government interventions on higher education funding, as announced by the Prime Minister recently in Manchester and reiterated by the Minister in his statement earlier today. They are absolutely right, and that will have given a great deal of comfort to those going through higher education, as well as to universities themselves. As the Minister rightly pointed out earlier, the quality of British higher education is of vital importance, and the changes made—to be fair, by the Labour party when in government, and then continued by the coalition and then Conservative Governments—were necessary to safeguard the quality of British universities and higher education in the UK. They are to be wholly welcomed and are absolutely right, but we do need to address the fundamental issue of student debt, which is causing so much grief to young people and, by extension, to the party of government.

I hope that in the review the Minister alluded to earlier today we can find a solution that goes some way towards satisfying the concerns of young people in this respect and of course their families, who are usually co-contributors to higher education costs.
Mounting student debt is one of the problems of our time. Currently, young people are leaving university with an average debt of £42,000. Although, theoretically, that debt may never be repaid, and in lots of cases never will be, it is a burden that young people feel acutely. The Minister understands that and is doing what he can to look at that issue. I wish him well in his quest.

This is not simply about tuition fees; it is also about housing costs and the high rates that young people have to pay for university-related accommodation, which is often of an inferior or distinctly mediocre standard. It seems to me that that is sometimes a covert way of universities raising yet more money.

Given that universities are relatively well off, I think we all would agree that they need to be particularly careful about spending money. That comes to the crux of what I want to discuss. This debate is at a time of relative restraint in pay across the public and quasi-public sectors. We have seen, as Members of Parliament, the results of that, with the concerns expressed in our mailbags and the bow wave of pressure to relax restraint that has been in place for some years now. People see that and examples of where it has not applied, and they make adverse comparisons. When people see very high pay leapng up and up, they are entitled to feel aggrieved, particularly when they feel they have some direct involvement in paying for what they see as excess. That certainly is the case here, as my mailbag has demonstrated.

In the past five years, vice-chancellors’ pay has increased by 17.4%. It now averages £278,000 a year. At Bath, it is £451,000 a year. By comparison, the chief executive of the Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust receives £185,000 a year, which most people would think is pretty good. He runs an organisation that is just as complex as, if not more so than, the University of Bath; the university employs 4,800 people against the Royal United's 3,015.

It is right to compare those salaries with that paid to the Prime Minister, and the reason is that people generally feel it is inappropriate for people in the quasi-public sector and public sector to be paid multiples of the income of the Prime Minister unless there is a very good reason.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I was happy to join the hon. Gentleman in resigning from the University of Bath’s court. I never quite understood why I was on the court. I resigned in a previous incarnation, so it was only right and proper that I resigned on this occasion. Does he agree that one problem with university vice-chancellors is that they have other ways in which to supplement their income, such as where they live and their expenses, and that that information should be in the public domain? The University of Bath was very hesitant to share that information.

Dr Murrison: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I will come on to some of the benefits later on in my remarks, and it will not surprise him to know—I suspect he has read the report, as I have—that the University of Bath features large in the University and College Union’s report on this subject, regrettably, as one of the arguably worst examples of what I certainly represent as excess at the top of higher education in this country, which is the matter we are seeking to resolve.

The Prime Minister is paid £152,000 a year. The Prime Minister, of course, heads the Government, and it is extraordinary therefore that the vice-chancellor of Bath University should be paid £451,000, which is pretty much three times the salary of the Prime Minister. I think most people in this country would have a general sense that that is odd, to put it mildly, and needs quite considerable justification.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and congratulate him on his remarks, which I have a little over two hours to make.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Gentleman about this matter earlier today at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. The Government have advised that they will deal with fat cats in the boardroom, but little has been done on this issue, which is why this debate is appropriate and necessary. At Queen’s University in Belfast, the vice-chancellor’s wage rose from £230,000 to £249,000 in 2014, but the university does excellent work and has partnerships involving medical research and discovering new drugs. That figure pales into insignificance when one discovers that the vice-chancellor of the University of Huddersfield earned £364,564 in the financial year to 2016. Is it not time to address that?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman is obviously correct. That is why I am bringing this matter to the Floor of the House. There is an issue with Governments seeking to control pay in that way in the private sector, but not in the public and quasi-public sectors, where things are quite different due to the large sums of public money. It is perfectly legitimate for this place and for Ministers to be involved in some of that, certainly in setting the right environment for the determination of pay settlements. We will be in an unhappy, uncomfortable place if we continue to see the escalation of recent years.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The University of Bath is in my constituency, so I take a great interest in this. A motion raising concerns over the vice-chancellor’s pay was discussed during a meeting of the university court in February this year. The motion was defeated by the votes of the very people who had benefited from decisions on pay, despite the clear conflict of interest, which raises grave concerns about the governance of our universities.

Dr Murrison: I absolutely agree. The functioning of remuneration committees in universities needs to be addressed. Ministers have recently set out a vehicle for doing so, and I will come on to discuss the Office for Students and how it might be used to increase transparency about remuneration.
Remuneration committees are, to put it mildly, opaque. How they are constituted and how they operate varies, and their willingness to be open also varies greatly between institution-related pay. The University and College Union has made clear. Bath is probably not an exceptional example of transparency in the setting of vice-chancellors’ pay, and that lack of transparency means that the quality of those settlements is likely to be diminished. We know that well in this place, because we have been through some of this in our not-too-distant past. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, and the public getting to see what is going on often acts as a restraint on pay and benefits. Any transparency that can be linked to the process and to this part of the quasi-public sector has to be a good thing.

We also need to discuss what has happened to pay more generally within higher education. Much of the disaffection that has been expressed to me since the early summer has come from the academic staff of our universities. They have expressed some frustration that the rewards for institutions achieving great things appear to be accruing to higher management staff and vice-chancellors, whereas they have seen little benefit. They have seen their salaries increase by 3.8% over five years, which is in contrast to the average 17.4% increase for vice-chancellors, and the average pay for a tenured academic is a little over £49,000.

That seems rather strange, particularly in the context of performance-related pay. If we seriously believe in performance-related pay in the public and quasi-public sectors, we cannot simply except the majority of the workforce from that form of remuneration. That makes no sense, particularly since the drivers of quality in universities are clearly those at the chalk face—those at the laboratory bench. They are the drivers of the good-quality student experience and quality research for which this country is renowned and which we must maintain. Those people are being alienated by the egregious awards that they see coming out of remuneration committees to senior people in universities. The demoralising effect must be fully understood. When remuneration committees consider top-level pay and their legitimate need to attract high-quality people to the top of their institution, they must also understand more clearly the effect of such rewards on those who do the work.

Wera Hobhouse: Less than a week ago, a group of students came to my surgery telling me that rents on campus are going up by 8%. Is there any wonder that the public perception clearly does not bear his point out. I would not be surprised, however, if that was the case. The trouble is that the lack of transparency around a lot of this material in the university sector means that it is quite difficult to make that comparison. Were it to be the case—and I suspect he is right—I would clearly want the universities to address it, as it is simply not acceptable.

I was interested in my right hon. Friend’s earlier point about performance-related pay, and in preparing for the debate I did look at those universities that had significantly increased the level of vice-chancellor pay in the recent past and compared that with improvements as judged by the Complete University Guide set of metrics, which is used by most pundits and commentators to compare universities. The students certainly look at those figures very closely when deciding where to go.

I stared at the figures and compared and contrasted them for some time, and I could not see any correlation between improved pay for vice-chancellors and improved metrics. Indeed, there is some suggestion that there is an inverse correlation, which rather bears down on the point about performance-related pay. I can see very little evidence of it operating here. We need to be careful about performance-related pay, because it is set by remuneration committees and, unless its terms are available for scrutiny, the goals could be eminently achievable. That would make a mockery of the whole thing, which comes back to my central point: we must have transparency in how pay is set if we are to have any confidence in our current system.

I absolutely accept that vice-chancellor pay and benefit packages are a tiny part of a multi-billion-pound consideration in higher education. That point was made clearly by Lord Willetts when he was the universities Minister. He rightly sought to put the whole thing into perspective, but my worry is that in the remuneration of vice-chancellors and senior people in higher education we have a window into what might be going on more generally in the universities sector. If we are seeing such egregious examples of the misuse of public funds and student indebtedness, as I believe we are in this case, we wonder what is happening more generally in this sector.

Universities have charitable status. The Higher Education Funding Council governs that, with this subcontracted by the Charities Commission, which has written to me on this subject. It is important that we emphasise that charities—universities, in this case—have charitable purposes; they are meant to use their moneys for charitable purposes to demonstrate charitable good. They should not be using money unless they can demonstrate that expenditure in some way satisfies their charitable purposes.

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous in giving way, and that is typical of him. Does he agree that it is not just an issue of vice-chancellor pay but of senior management pay and the random way in which professors are paid from university to university, sometimes using significant amounts of funds? There is also an issue of pay disparity in senior management between men and women. There is some suggestion that BBC-type problems might be affecting our universities.

Dr Murrison: I am at a slight disadvantage on my right hon. Friend’s latter point, because my interest in this matter was sparked by Dame Glynis Breakwell, the vice-chancellor of the University of Bath. She is right at the top of the pay league table, so my local experience clearly does not bear his point out. I would not be surprised, however, if that was the case. The trouble is that the lack of transparency around a lot of this material in the university sector means that it is quite difficult to make that comparison. Were it to be the case—and I suspect he is right—I would clearly want the universities to address it, as it is simply not acceptable.

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[Dr Murrison]

The University and College Union’s report of February 2016, for which I am in its debt, sheds interesting light on this subject, because it discusses not only pay, but other benefits. Although many universities did not respond to the UCU’s request for information, and so we need to be slightly guardedly about its conclusions, this report nevertheless gives us some useful data. For example, it shows that Bath’s vice-chancellor spends an average of £313 a night for hotel accommodation and that Middlesex University’s vice-chancellor spends an average of £448 a night, whereas the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority will allow MPs £150 a night in London and £120 a night outside it. I make no comparison between MPs and vice-chancellors; what I would say is that £150 a night seems reasonable. People will not often hear a Member of Parliament being nice about IPSA, but I am nice about it; for the record, I think it does a good job in general and it has pitched that about right, because we can certainly get accommodation in London for £150 a night or outside London for £120 a night and we will not be living underneath the arches. How someone can spend £448 or £313 a night, inside or outside London, is a little beyond me—it is probably beyond my experience. That is an example of what I mean about the use of funds for charitable purposes. In what way does that expenditure advance the charitable purposes of these institutions?

It gets worse, however, because the report goes on to consider air fares. Twenty-one universities that responded to the request for information—there may well be more that decided not to respond, because they do not want to share their information, for obvious reasons—ranging from high-end Bristol to the frankly obscure, send their principals only by first-class or business-class air travel. That is a remarkable thing. The vice-chancellor of the University of Bath spent £23,000 in 2014-15 on air fares and, according to the report, flew exclusively by first or business class. Members of Parliament will know full well that IPSA will take a dim view of any Member seeking to claim for anything other than economy. The Minister may well be familiar with the ability of Ministers to fly long haul by business class if they have a meeting the next day—most Departments would allow that for Ministers, and I certainly recall it—but for short-haul flights of less than three hours most certainly that particular benefit would not be got. It seems excessive for universities—to remember the point about their charitable status—to have their principals and senior staff fly first or business class habitually. In this day and age, that seems wholly excessive.

It gets worse still. Many universities provide accommodation for their vice-chancellors. The report lists accommodation occupied by vice-chancellors, and some of it looks rather attractive, particularly that in Bath. At No. 2 in the catalogue is the vice-chancellor of the University of Bath, who in 2014-15 occupied accommodation worth nearly £3 million, which I think would seem excessive to most. It would probably seem excessive to the parents who have recently delivered their children to university halls of residence, many of which are distinctly shabby.

My chief concern about all this is the lack of transparency. The University and College Union makes transparency the crux of its survey and report, and it is right to do so. In seeking the information it has sought, it has found that universities have in many cases been reluctant to engage, and we are beginning to see why. It found that 71% of those universities that responded had their vice-chancellors as members of their remuneration committees. In most walks of life, that would be considered a strange feature of a remuneration committee, even if the individual who was the subject of a particular discussion absented him or herself from the room while their issue was being discussed, because pay for an individual is not seen in isolation; it is seen against the backdrop of other senior pay within the institution and senior pay in other institutions.

I perceive a cartel operating in higher education, with vice-chancellors, and senior university staff generally, sharing each other’s remuneration processes to their mutual benefit. I am of course not in any way suggesting that there is some deliberate attempt to do that, but that seems to me to be how it might work in practice. In short, remuneration committees appear to be unsatisfactorily shadowy for organisations operating in the public or quasi-public sectors. We see instances of minutes not being published, and of redacted minutes being published. When we are more dealing with public funds and student indebtedness, that is unacceptable.

My other concern is about leadership. Vice-chancellors are quintessential leaders; leading is what they do. If they are not leaders, they are nothing at all. Yet some of the most senior, such as the vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford, have been bleating about being paid less than footballers and bankers. That does not strike me as leadership. At a time of pay restraint in the university sector, as well as in others, it seems to me wholly inappropriate for the leaders of these organisations to be complicit in a system that gives them a pay rise that is way out of kilter with that being awarded to their staff. That is wholly wrong and I hope that, going forward, we will see the same sort of restraint among the senior echelons of higher education as we have seen further down the pay scale.

I shall finish by being nice about the vice-chancellor of the University of Bath, because Dame Glynis Breakwell has done a grand job, over many years, and the University of Bath is a fine institution. Dame Glynis deserves warm thanks and praise for all the hard work she has put in. I do not blame her for her extraordinarily generous remuneration package; I do blame the system that has allowed it. I am pleased that a lot of the things the Government have been talking about recently—particularly the Office for Students, which I know my hon. Friend the Minister will talk about in a moment—will help in that respect. In particular, the OfS will add transparency to the way in which senior people in higher education are paid, bearing in mind the charitable status of those institutions, and the fact that they are in receipt of large sums of public money and the proceeds of student indebtedness. If it manages to achieve that through reforming not only remuneration committees, but the general atmosphere and ethos around this, it will have done a good job and that will be an early indication that it will be a worthy successor to the Higher Education Funding Council.

The purpose of this debate was simply to discuss how we might restore some balance and confidence to this particular element of university finances. I fear that I have hardly ingratiated myself with senior university administrators. I hope very much that we will continue
to remunerate appropriately these heads of our wonderful national institutions, but most can agree that pay for university vice-chancellors has become excessive and that, in the months and years ahead, we need to do something about it.

5.40 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) on securing this important debate on university vice-chancellors’ pay. I am grateful for the opportunity to set out how the Government have prioritised value for money in the higher education sector, and to touch on our plans to address the issue of senior staff pay.

With students and taxpayers heavily invested in our world-class higher education system, the Government are determined that value for money should be a key priority. To that end, the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 introduced reforms to increase competition between providers and to promote greater choice for students.

The Act introduced a new regulator for the higher education sector, the Office for Students. Once it comes into being next year, the OfS will develop a new risk-based approach to regulation. For the first time, all registered higher education providers in England will be part of the same system. This new regulatory framework will promote diversity and innovation in the higher education sector in the interests of students. It will drive up quality and standards, incentivise better teaching and learning, and inspire the growth of sector-relevant skills to increase employability.

Under the Act, one of the duties of the OfS is to have regard to the need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education by English providers. It will ensure more transparency for students so that they can have greater confidence that their money is being well spent.

We introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework with the intention of raising the standard of teaching in higher education and giving students clear information about where they are likely to receive good teaching and to get great outcomes from their time at university. Almost 300 providers took part in the first trial year of the TEF, including all but two English universities and more than 100 colleges and private providers. Excluding those with provisional ratings, roughly 75% of entrants received either a gold or silver award.

We are making it a priority for students to know their rights and to have fair contracts that enable them to take action if the reality of their experience does not match what was advertised. With a view to ensuring students obtain value for money, the OfS will use its powers, including setting a regulatory condition for providers to create an environment in which providers fully meet their obligations to students as consumers, and students will be able to build an understanding of their corresponding rights.

If a student is not satisfied with their course or provider, they may wish to switch to a different one. That has been difficult for many students up until now. The Act places a duty on the OfS to monitor and report on arrangements for students to transfer, and empowers the OfS to facilitate, encourage and promote such arrangements.

The Department for Education will shortly be launching a consultation on behalf of the OfS. That will include a proposed condition of registration requiring providers to publish information on their student transfer arrangements.

Many universities are large and complex organisations. Highly skilled and talented individuals are needed to run these organisations effectively. In some cases, universities may be competing internationally to secure the right managerial expertise. Higher education providers are rightly private, autonomous and independent institutions—they are not in the public sector and they are not really in the quasi-public sector—and they are solely responsible for setting the salaries of their staff. Nevertheless, these providers also have a public service mission, as my hon. Friend mentioned. With public funding providing the sector’s most significant single source of income, there is a legitimate public interest in promoting the efficiency of providers. This must include senior staff pay.

There is a risk that increasing salaries diverts money away from a provider’s core mission of teaching and research. Exceptional pay can only be justified by exceptional performance. The Government have consistently used their annual grant letter to HEFCE to call on universities and their remuneration committees to exercise restraint on senior staff pay. In my most recent letter, I made it clear that efficiency must include demonstrating restraint in setting senior pay. The Department’s consultation will contain proposals reflecting my requests that the OfS introduces a new condition of registration requiring the governing bodies of providers with access to student support to publish the number of staff paid more than £100,000 a year. For staff paid more than £150,000, providers will be required to publish their justification for these salaries. In the event that a provider fails to meet the requirements of this condition of registration, the OfS will be able to use its powers, which include monetary penalties, to take action.

The OfS will also issue guidance to help providers to meet the requirements of the condition of registration, and use its power to investigate the governance of an institution through assessments of management effectiveness, economy and efficiency where there are substantiated concerns.

Robert Halfon: Thank you, my hon. Friend for his work on this. Will the consultation also look at potential gender-related pay disparities?

Joseph Johnson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for mentioning that because we do indeed plan to ensure that such issues are considered by the OfS.

Arrangements will also be made to compile and publish data on the levels of HE senior staff remuneration beyond what is required by the registration condition, with a particular focus on protected characteristics such as gender and ethnicity. Further to this, I have called on the sector to work through the Committee of University Chairs to develop and introduce its own remuneration code. Such a code should encourage greater independence of remuneration committees, the publication of the pay ratio of ‘top to median staff’ pay and explanations of top pay increases that are greater than increases in average pay in an institution as a whole. I am pleased that the CUC has confirmed that it plans to take forward the development of this code.
[Joseph Johnson]

I am confident that these actions, in addition to our wider reforms to the higher education sector as a whole, will deliver much greater transparency and accountability, as well as improved value for money for taxpayers and for students. We have legislated to facilitate greater competition within the sector and choice for students. We have successfully promoted measures such as the TEF to help to students to make better informed decisions that affect their futures and enhance teaching quality, and we have acted to address escalating senior staff pay.

Let me be absolutely clear, for the avoidance of all doubt, that I want to see the relentless upwards ratchet in senior staff pay come to a halt, and I am confident that the measures the Government have put forward through the OfS will achieve that. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire is reassured by the Government’s strong action and, once again, I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

5.49 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 12 October 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade White Paper

1. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What plans he has to publish a White Paper on trade. [901070]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): Since he is a conscientious and committed Member of the House of Commons, the hon. Gentleman will know that the Government published a trade White Paper on Monday 9 October 2017. The trade White Paper establishes the principles that will guide future UK trade policy and sets out the preparatory steps that we are taking. The paper can be found in the Libraries of both Houses and on the gov.uk website.

Mr Cunningham: What transitional plans does the Secretary of State have for the transitional period if he cannot necessarily do the trade deals that he wants to do?

Dr Fox: If the hon. Gentleman is referring to the transitional adoption of existing EU agreements, I can tell him that we have had a very positive response from other Governments, who, like us, want to ensure that there is no disruption of trade at the point of departure from the European Union. We will want to get as many of those in place as we can. That depends partly on the willingness of partners to get that ready on time; there are obviously contingency measures available to us under the World Trade Organisation to ensure continued market access in any case.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can we just declare for free trade?

Dr Fox: This Government constantly declares for free trade. In fact, as we leave the European Union and take up our independent seat on the World Trade Organisation, this country intends to champion the cause of global free trade, especially at a time when the growth in trade has been slowing down in recent years.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Does the International Trade Secretary recognise that people fear that in the event of, for example, a very right-wing, ideological Government, we could see the erosion of social standards through our trade agreements or even the erosion of our ability to protect our national health service with the wrong type of trade treaty? Will he guarantee parliamentary scrutiny of every trade deal done?

Dr Fox: I would like the Government to be judged by their actions. Therefore, as I indicated to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), as we want to transition the already agreed EU free trade agreements into UK law—which will include, for example, workers’ rights and environmental standards—I hope that we will get the full support of the Opposition in doing that and in getting the legislation available to give us the powers to do so.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): The White Paper sets out a strong case for free trade: it is good for growth, and it is good for jobs—but occasionally other countries will act in unfair ways, such as through the dumping of goods. Will the Secretary of State therefore confirm that it will always be the Government’s approach to respond to that in a proportionate, carefully targeted and time-limited fashion?

Dr Fox: The Government will bring forward legislation that sets out our plans for a trade remedies authority to ensure that the protections that UK business currently has—and that the UK workforce currently enjoy—are continued when we leave the European Union.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): White Papers are all good and well, but yesterday the Scottish Government published a report showing what is at stake for business as the UK edges closer to the Brexit cliff edge. We know that the Secretary of State has consulted the business community to find out how it will be affected, but will he commit today to publishing the findings, as called for by a range of MPs across the House, even if they show that business wants to stay in the single market and customs union? At what point will this Government stop governing in secret and publish the reality of the impact of Brexit?

Dr Fox: The Government are of course extremely concerned about any perceptions of instability. We will consult widely, particularly when it comes to new free trade agreements, but of course the greatest threat to stability, particularly in Scotland, is the insistence of the Scottish Government on threatening a second referendum on independence.

Car Exports

2. Chris Williamson (Rochdale) (Lab): What plans he has to facilitate exports from car manufacturers after the UK leaves the EU. [901071]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will be leading negotiations on our trade relationship with the EU, aimed at the greatest possible tariff and barrier-free trade with our European neighbours, including for the
automotive sector. The UK will also be able to negotiate our own trade agreements around the world, and it is a high priority that we achieve the best possible deals with global partners. We are in close contact with stakeholders across the automotive industry to that end.

Chris Williamson: Last month, in a speech to the Bank of England, the Prime Minister described the free market economy as “the greatest agent of collective human progress ever created.” In view of the Prime Minister’s ideological objection to Government intervention, will the Minister say how the highly skilled workforce at Toyota in Derbyshire will be able to find comparable employment, in the event that of Toyota relocates thanks to the Government’s botched Brexit negotiations?

Mark Garnier: I know the hon. Gentleman stands up for those constituents of his who work at the Toyota plant, but we need to look more carefully at what Toyota is doing. It has made a £240 million investment in the Burnaston factory, to make a commitment to the UK after Brexit, and that has been supported by a further £21.5 million from the Government, who are also committed to the workers he describes in his constituency.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given that the United Kingdom imports £30 billion worth of vehicles—more than we export each year—does my hon. Friend agree that it is in the interests of not just the UK but the EU for us to have barrier and tariff-free trade on vehicles in the future?

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is right. We are absolutely committed to a tariff and barrier-free relationship with the European Union in the future. It is worth remembering that the European Union exports twice as many cars to Britain as we export to the EU. It is in all our interests—it is in the interests of all the workers in the European Union—for us to achieve a successful and fruitful outcome.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Following the referendum and the subsequent depreciation of sterling, a number of car manufacturers in Britain have announced plans for further investment and an expansion of production. Nissan, in particular, says that it will expand production by 20% and invest more in the supply chain in Britain. Does that augur well for Britain’s exports, and should we not start to look towards a time when we can export more than we import?

Mark Garnier: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. One of the characteristics of the UK car industry over the last few years is the fact that UK components of the supply chain now represent 42%, up from 38%. We have a great opportunity in the whole European Union automotive sector, and our Department is working incredibly hard to ensure that we take advantage of it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given that this country voted to leave the European Union, is it not the duty of every Member to talk up the British economy and the chances that are available to British manufacturing to exploit the new opportunities that will be presented to it around the world?

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend, too, is absolutely right. I travel the world—as, indeed, do all our Ministers—and meet representatives of businesses in countries around the world who see the huge value that this country has, and the great British brand that the Department is representing and selling abroad. What we have to offer is fantastic, and I am an unashamed patriot when it comes to our great exports from fabulous businesses such as Aston Martin, and any number of others. It is the duty of everyone in the House to support all those businesses, and to talk up the British Isles when they travel, not just around the world but in the United Kingdom.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State has just said that he wants the Government to be judged by their actions. Can the Minister tell us what the cost of the Nissan deal was, whether deals have been struck with other car manufacturers, and whether the Government have set aside a large budget to ensure that other sectors can continue to export successfully?

Mark Garnier: The right hon. Gentleman knows full well that, under state aid rules which apply not only to the European Union but to the World Trade Organisation, the Government cannot give subsidies to businesses to create unfair competition against other countries. However, as I said in an earlier answer, the Government have supported Toyota with a £21 million investment. Any support that is given to any businesses—in the automotive sector, and across the piece—will be fully compliant with all the rules by which we abide. Subsidies such as those from the European regional development fund are widely known about, and they are perfectly fair and perfectly legal.

Foreign Direct Investment

3. Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): What is his policy on attracting foreign direct investment into the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): The Department supports foreign investment in all parts of the United Kingdom through our overseas network, international events programme, bespoke sector support, online services and regional teams. We serve the whole UK by working closely with investment promotion bodies in the devolved Administrations and local enterprise partnerships in England to co-operate effectively across a range of investment support activities.

Jeremy Quin: We have already heard positive news this morning about Toyota and Nissan. Will the Minister join me in welcoming recent work by EMY Consulting which proves that the United Kingdom remains the most attractive place in Europe for foreign direct investment?

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have seen some truly amazing numbers coming in. Britain has a record number of inward investment projects, and it is worth bearing in mind the fact that 158,000 jobs have been created and a further 66,000 safeguarded over the past year or so as a result of foreign direct investment.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am very happy for the Minister to go around the world selling Britain, but will he come to see the real economy in, for instance, Huddersfield, where we have a strong manufacturing sector, or Leeds, where we have a financial sector? Not one person I meet in those sectors wants us to continue with this folly of Brexit. [Interruption.]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): What about the voters?

Mark Garnier: Yes, what about all those voters throughout the UK, 52% of whom voted for Brexit? I was a remainer, but we have to uphold the fundamental principle of democracy in this country, and it is the job of all of us in the Government to do our level best to embrace the opportunities—the optimistic opportunities—that Brexit presents.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to my constituency and talking to my exporters and the Port of Felixstowe, and ask him to assure me that he took on board the takeout that they want us to be oven ready with regulations and so forth as we look to move out of the common market.

Mark Garnier: It was a great pleasure to visit Muntons in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Her constituency produces a huge number of ingredients that go into Scottish whisky, beer and any number of fantastic products across the country. It is absolutely right that in addressing the question of regulations going forward into a post-Brexit era we in this country maintain our incredibly high standards of regulation, including workers’ rights as well as food standards.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is assuring his hon. Friend that he is indeed oven ready. That is a new one on me; the hon. Lady has very helpfully added to the collective lexicon of the House of Commons.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Why do the Government not draw a clearer distinction between inward foreign investment, which adds capacity and jobs and is welcome, and inward investment for acquisitions in devalued pounds, which often detracts from our science and technology?

Mark Garnier: The leader of the Liberal Democrats raised a very important point in respect of looking at the statistics. He is absolutely right that fresh investment that comes into this country that creates and safeguards jobs must be disaggregated from, say, stock market transactions, where there is a significant investment in that type of thing. We are looking very carefully at how to disaggregate these two types of investment to get a much clearer picture, but he raises an important point and I assure him that the Department’s economists are looking at this.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): In the 12 months since the EU referendum in 2016, 32 Israeli companies have invested in new business ventures in the UK, bringing an increase in capital investment of 32% from that country. Does that not demonstrate, first, a strong vote of confidence in the UK economy, and, secondly, that Israel should be a natural partner for any future free trade agreement?

Mark Garnier: Indeed. I have visited Israel; we do a lot of trade with it, and the investment it is making in this country is very welcome. Importantly, since the Brexit vote, a huge number of investment projects are coming to the UK, which is creating new jobs. Doom mongers like me who during the referendum were part of the “Project Fear” campaign have been proved wrong, and it is important that we stand up and say that so far we have not got this right, and that is incredibly good news for both Britain and our individual constituencies.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Government’s own figures show a 9% drop in the number of new jobs created through foreign direct investment projects and a record trade deficit in goods exports. In the real world, that means thousands of workers losing their jobs, as we have seen at BAE Systems. Does the Minister accept that it will take a fully aligned trade and industrial strategy to protect jobs in this country? The current policy of relying on a falling pound is simply not good enough.

Mark Garnier: I would refer the hon. Gentleman to the fact that we now have record numbers of people in work, record employment and record low unemployment. None the less, he raises an important point on the relationship between this Department and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It is absolutely the case that in creating a pitch book for the UK, we must offer a number of different opportunities for companies around the world. Part of that is our tax regime, part of it is our tax credits regime, and part of it is our enthusiasm to legislate, for example, to allow autonomous vehicles to be tested on all British roads. This is a whole package from the entire Government working together. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the industrial strategy as part of what we are presenting to the rest of the world, but this also involves the whole Government.

Leaving the EU: Workers’ Rights and Fair Trade

4. Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the principles of fair trade, workers’ rights and environmental protection are included in future trade agreements after the UK leaves the EU. [901073]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The UK has long supported the promotion of our values globally, including successfully supporting workers’ rights and environmental protections as a member of the EU, and the UK will continue to play a leading role on these as we leave the EU. We are committed to upholding the UK’s high standards; our prosperity benefits from us reinforcing these high standards, not abandoning them.

Thangam Debbonaire: I am glad that the White Paper mentions respecting the role of Parliament, but to protect workers’ rights, fair trade and environmental rules, will the Minister now guarantee to transfer to this House the rights that our elected representatives in the European Parliament have to scrutinise, debate, amend and vote on trade agreements?

Greg Hands: The Government have been absolutely clear on the importance of this House and this Parliament scrutinising trade agreements. There is an irony in the hon. Lady’s question. Only last month, she voted against the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which would
write into domestic legislation 40 years of workers’ rights and environmental protection coming from Europe. She did not want to see that transfer. She even whipped her own side to vote against the Bill. Today, she is calling for us to introduce European procedures. I think her actions speak louder than her words.

**Leaving the EU: Trade Policy**

5. Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that the Government will have an effective trade policy after the UK leaves the EU.

10. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that the UK will have an effective trade policy after the UK leaves the EU.

**The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands):** As the Prime Minister set out on Monday, the Government are preparing for the UK’s future as an independent trading nation and will maximise our opportunities globally by seeking a deep and special partnership with the EU and boosting our trade relationships around the world.

The trade White Paper establishes the principles that will guide future UK trade policy and sets out the preparatory steps we are taking, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State laid out earlier in response to Question 1.

**Mr Fysh:** Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is Government policy to take full control of the UK’s trade policy in services regulation, to take advantage of the free trade opportunities that are open to us as we leave the EU? Does he agree that this must not be obviated by any conditions of a period of implementation for our new arrangements with the EU?

**Greg Hands:** The Prime Minister has made it very clear that we want a deep and comprehensive trade agreement with the EU. We in the Department for International Trade are losing no time in preparing ourselves for our own independent trade policy in terms of transitioning existing EU FTAs, in terms of the 14 trade working groups that we have set up and in terms of transitioning trade preferences for the developing world, and that includes the ability to scope out and negotiate new trade agreements once we leave.

**Rehman Chishti:** Will the Minister update the House on the work that the Government are doing to engage with frontier markets, and how these are being prioritised with existing established markets?

**Greg Hands:** The Department for International Trade is devoting significant efforts to transitioning the EU’s existing FTAs into a UK FTA. We are doing this in consultation with the European Union. In the majority of countries—certainly all those that we have spoken to so far—third parties are in agreement with that. Just two weeks ago I was in Peru, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was in Colombia, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State met the Ecuadorian Trade Minister to talk about the transition of the EU/Andean FTA—a perfect example in this space.

**WTO Tariff Rate Quotas**

6. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the World Trade Organisation and his US counterpart on the division of WTO tariff rate quotas between the UK and the EU after the UK leaves the EU.

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):** I discussed the UK’s independent membership of the WTO with the US trade representative Robert Lighthizer when I visited the US in July, and I have had several productive conversations with the WTO director general Roberto Azevêdo, most recently on my visit to Geneva in July.
Kerry McCarthy: I understand that Britain and the EU have now formally informed WTO members of how they would like quotas to be split after Brexit, but the Trump Administration and seven WTO members have already rejected the proposals. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that a deal on quotas is achieved?

Dr Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me the chance to explain our methodology. We decided to split the quotas that we have up to now shared with the EU on a market basis. In other words, we would not divide by 28 or by 15, but by the UK’s share of a market. We did that to avoid disadvantaging exporters from other countries, as well as our own producers or consumers. That is the best route to avoid disputes in Switzerland.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): As we are talking about the WTO, if this country cannot reach a deal with the EU, what are the Department’s plans if we do not get an agreement on quotas?

Dr Fox: As I have said, we first have to get our trading schedules agreed and then we have to agree free trade agreements with third countries, which involves the division of quotas. We are making good progress on that. We want a comprehensive agreement, because that is in the interests of all concerned. However, the Government are preparing contingencies should there be no agreement, which is the only responsible thing for a Government to do.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows full well that a technical rectification would disadvantage other members, which is why seven member states of the WTO have written to Azevêdo specifically setting out that that is unacceptable to them. On 6 July, the Secretary of State said that he was confident that a technical rectification of WTO schedules would be “smooth and fully understood by our trading partners.”—[Official Report, 6 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 1364.]

Well, it is not. What is he going to do about that? What assessment has he made of the delays and of the impact on our businesses that will result from that?

Dr Fox: I do not anticipate that that will happen. The hon. Gentleman clearly does not understand what the process is, or what a negotiation is. It is quite clear that our first offer is not the final thing that we expect to be accepted. For example, we have no agreement yet on support measures of support. Those issues will be dealt with during the negotiation—[Interruption.] I know that the hon. Gentleman likes to multitask, but being able to speak and listen simultaneously is not among his abilities.

Topical Questions

T1. [901093] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Department has three tasks: promoting UK exports to support a growing economy that serves the whole country; maximising opportunities for wealth creation, including through overseas direct investment; and negotiating the best international trading framework for the UK outside the EU.

I welcome Crawford Falconer to the Department as chief trade negotiation adviser—he brings a wealth of knowledge—and I can announce the convening of the Board of Trade today, which will ensure that the benefits of trade and investment are spread across the whole UK.

Henry Smith: The EU Commission seems hellbent on damaging the economies of the remaining member states through its Brexit negotiations, so will my right hon. Friend say what preparations are being made for no deal?

Dr Fox: The best thing for the whole of Europe is for us to reach a deep and comprehensive agreement on trade. We are committed to doing so, and we hope that our European partners will commit to move on to the second stage of negotiations as soon as possible, not least to remove any uncertainty to businesses and workers across Europe. However, if we are unable to do so, the Government have already undertaken a wide range of contingency plans.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Following the Bombardier tariff crisis, can the Secretary of State guarantee that Airbus in Bristol, which employs many people in my constituency, will not have new tariffs to pay once Britain leaves the EU?

Dr Fox: There are two elements to that. Of course we want to maintain a completely tariff-free trading environment in Europe, and that is what we should be able to do, given that it is the starting point—that, of course, is unique in any trade negotiation. On the Bombardier case, we have made our views very clear to the United States. I spoke to Wilbur Ross, the Secretary of Commerce, only last week.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Government’s approach, based on the Florence speech, is entirely sensible and pragmatic. Of course we want a free trade deal, but it takes two to tango. May I press the Secretary of State further on earlier questions relating to what happens if there is no deal and we leave the single market at the end of March 2019? Is the Treasury giving him all the resources he needs to prepare for no deal—for schedules and making deals with other countries? That is absolutely vital.

Dr Fox: I do not really wish to trumpet this to other Departments, but our Department has a unique agreement with the Treasury: we are able to increase staffing levels when that relates to Brexit issues, and we will continue to do so. As I said, we want to ensure that we get a good deal. There is no difference between the Chancellor and me. The Chancellor says that we need to spend money only as necessary. I think that that is correct, but we also need to ensure that we spend money on all areas where contingency plans are necessary.

Mr Speaker: I call Barry Gardiner—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman looks perplexed.
Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Are we on topicals, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: We are. The hon. Gentleman must try to keep up!

Barry Gardiner: Thank you, Sir; it is always good to have you keeping me up to pace.

Recent reports suggest that Boeing provided Monarch Airlines with 45 Boeing 737 MAX jets at a cut price and that Boeing used a complex sale and leaseback deal to provide Monarch with more than £100 million in cash against a paper profit. Given the Secretary of State’s earlier commitment to trade defence remedies, why has he left it to me to write to the EU Commissioners to ask them to investigate this as a matter of potential illegal dumping and anti-competitive behaviour?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): I am happy to look at the precise nature of the hon. Gentleman’s allegation, but I have to say that the Government’s response on Monarch has been exemplary. We have devoted an incredible amount of resources to getting tens of thousands of stranded British subjects abroad back to this country. The process was led incredibly well by the Department for Transport, and we should be proud of the Government’s efforts in helping the victims of Monarch.

T3. [901095] Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Sheep farming in this country is good for the countryside, food and farming. It is important that we combine making sure that we control quotas of New Zealand lamb with maintaining exports to France. How is the Secretary of State getting on with disaggregating the EU quotas on New Zealand lamb meat?

Dr Fox: We will take the same approach to New Zealand lamb as we do to all other tariff-rate quotas: allocate them on the basis of usage. As I have already explained, that will keep the market stable and mean that we are not disadvantaging New Zealand exporters or our domestic market. That is not only the fairest thing to do, but the best way to prevent the UK from being taken to dispute at the WTO, which is again to our mutual advantage.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): If the EU27 do not give the two-year extension that the Prime Minister begged for in Florence, trade barriers will rise between the UK and how many other countries? Does the Department have a number?

Dr Fox: As I have said, our aim is to maintain market stability, but of course the good news is that the UK is continuing to export extremely well—we had an increase of about 15% in our exports in the 12 months to August 2017. We want to encourage that and to ensure that we get bigger market penetration, irrespective of what deal we get with the EU.

Mr Speaker: I call Richard Graham. Where is the feller? He is not here.

Dr Fox: I am not sure that I fully understand the hon. Gentleman’s question. If it is helpful to him, I can say that there are 27 other countries in the European Union and the EU has more than 40 FTAs around the world. As I mentioned earlier, one of the roles of our Department is to transition those into UK-only FTAs, which should avoid any cliff edge or future trade barriers at all.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The all-party parliamentary group on trade out of poverty, which I chair, is initiating an investigation into the role that the Commonwealth can play to help developing nations to trade out of poverty. We hope that that agenda will be taken up at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in April. We have a potential leadership role, so will the Secretary of State communicate with the Commonwealth secretariat to ensure that that agenda item is taken up?

Dr Fox: We have made it clear that we see our trade policy and our developmental policy as going hand in hand. We want countries to have the power to trade their way out of poverty. That will be one of our key themes at CHOGM and we will be setting out processes by which we think that can be made more possible in the future.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Many businesses in my constituency, particularly sheep and dairy farmers, are signing contracts early in the new year for exports in 2019. What certainty can the Secretary of State give them about pricing for 2019?

Dr Fox: Across the Government we will make our contingency plans, but we continue to hope that the EU will come forward with a proper commitment to entering into the second part of the trade deal, as we think that is in our mutual interest.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services has noted in recent inspections that forces have protected dedicated resources to support victims of domestic abuse. The number of police referrals, prosecutions and convictions for domestic abuse has increased significantly since 2010, but this Government are not complacent. In this Session, we will introduce a landmark domestic violence and abuse Bill to better protect and support victims and to bring perpetrators to justice.
Kelvin Hopkins: According to the crime survey for England and Wales, an estimated 2 million adults aged 16 to 59, mostly women, say that they were victims of domestic abuse in the past year. Do not the Government accept that the massive cuts in police resources that they have inflicted will inevitably mean that there will be fewer arrests and fewer prosecutions for domestic violence, leaving more women in danger?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I simply do not accept that at all. Interestingly, funding for Bedfordshire police has risen by 1.8% this year—that is £1.8 million. I hope that he will join me in congratulating his local police and crime commissioner on her personal leadership in tackling domestic violence in Bedfordshire and, in particular, on Project Emerald, which is delivering record numbers of prosecutions and protecting more women than ever before from domestic abuse.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which police force responds to domestic violence the best and which responds to it the worst, and will the Minister get them together in the same room at the same time, so that one can inform the other?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. I can assure him that through the rigorous inspections of HMICFRS and the Home Secretary’s leadership in bringing together Departments, we are doing everything that we can to support police officers to deliver the best possible outcomes for victims of domestic abuse and violence.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Minister said that legislation to tackle violence against women will be introduced. Will she comment on the practice of upskirting, on which a constituent of mine is leading a campaign? The practice involves individuals taking photographs underneath women’s skirts. I understand that it is unlawful in Scotland, so what plans does she have to introduce some form of penalty for it here?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I can assure him that through the rigorous inspections of HMICFRS and the Home Secretary’s leadership in bringing together Departments, we are doing everything that we can to support police officers to deliver the best possible outcomes for victims of domestic abuse and violence.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Alcohol plays a significant part in the scourge of domestic violence, so will the Minister consider using the forthcoming legislation she mentioned to allow the use of alcohol abstinence monitoring orders in domestic violence cases, given that they are proving so successful with respect to other violent offences?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the important role that, tragically, alcohol can play in cases of domestic abuse and violence. It also causes wider harms. Dealing with the abuse of alcohol is a key part of our modern crime prevention strategy, which is why we are looking carefully at what more we can do to keep people safe, including through new measures on alcohol.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The reluctance of victims of domestic abuse to complain, and the law’s chronic failure to prevent serial abusers, are distressingly commonplace. Does the Minister agree that a domestic violence register of convicted repeat offenders would help the police to save lives?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I do not accept the premise at all. Confidence in the police is higher than it has ever been, and more and more victims are feeling confident enough to come forward. We see more victims coming forward, more prosecutions and greater use of the powers that we already have to keep women safe. As I said, we are leaving no stone unturned and we are very ambitious about what more we can do to keep women and girls throughout the country safe.

Mr Speaker: I call Wera Hobhouse.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the Minister confirm—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady needs to ask Question 2.

Leaving the EU: Equalities and Human Rights

2. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on equalities and human rights.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, on ensuring that all the protections in the Equality Act 2010, including the public sector equality duty, will continue to apply after we have left the EU.

Wera Hobhouse: I apologise for being a newbie, Mr Speaker.

Will the Minister confirm that pregnant women will not be obliged to work night shifts after we have left the EU? They currently enjoy such a protection under EU law.

Justine Greening: EU equalities law has already been overwhelmingly transposed into UK law via the Equality Act. As I said, Ministers must also comply with a public sector equality duty. On workers’ rights more broadly, the Prime Minister was clear in her Lancaster House speech, which she made some time ago, that one of our key priorities will be to protect and maintain them.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): As the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, may I say how heartening it is to see seven Ministers present to respond to Women and Equalities questions, which shows the importance that the Government attach to these issues?
Ministers have been consistent and clear that their policy objective with the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is for things to stay the same after we leave the EU, with our having time to debate policy changes after that point. It is clear, however, that the removal of the charter of fundamental rights in itself creates a significant change in the underpinning of equality rights. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can avoid that unintended consequence?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Lady should take it as a compliment that seven Ministers are required to cope with her.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I said that first!

Justine Greening: As my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) points out, the Government are committed to this agenda, which is why so many Ministers are prepared to answer questions this morning. She raises an important point. I have been very clear that there will be no backsliding on our equalities agenda and law as we leave the EU. I know that my right hon. Friend has a meeting with the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) next week. That will be an important time to discuss how we can make sure that there will be no backsliding.

Mr Speaker: Very unusually, I had not heard the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), but I have now.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Many protections in EU law, especially equality rights, have already been written into UK law. Does the Minister therefore agree that our leaving the EU should not cause any detrimental impact on or removal of the rights and equalities that we currently enjoy, and will merely present us with the opportunity to further improve the law wherever we in the UK see fit to do so?

Justine Greening: Absolutely, and it is worth my pointing out that in several areas, UK law already goes beyond existing EU law.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the excellent Secretary of State agree that one of the many advantages of coming out of the EU is the fact that this Parliament will be able to improve equalities and human rights without being restricted by the European Union?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have been one of those countries around the world that has constantly stood up for human rights and that has been credible because of our human rights record and our legal framework. We are determined that there will be no backsliding. I have no doubt that this Government, and future Governments, will want to continue to make progress.

Women’s State Pension Age

3. Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of changes to the state pension age on women born in the 1950s.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage): The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has regular discussions with the Minister for Women and Equalities, but the Government will not be revisiting the state pension age for women born in the 1950s who are affected by the Pensions Acts 1995, 2007 and 2011.

Emma Hardy: What encouragement are the Government giving to the 1,524 women in my constituency of Hull West and Hessle who are suffering because of the lack of notice given by this Government about changes to the state pension age?

Caroline Dinenage: The Government have already introduced transitional arrangements at a cost of £1.1 billion. The cost of reversing the Acts would be in excess of £70 billion and create an inequality between women and men.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What is the Minister’s view of any proposal to change legislation that would then favour women as opposed to men in pensions legislation?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I am not a legal professional, but I think that any amendment to the current legislation that creates a new inequality between men and women would unquestionably be highly dubious as a matter of law.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Like scores of other 1950s women, I have struggled to get any information on the availability of apprenticeships that a Minister in a Westminster Hall debate on 5 July suggested were an option for struggling 1950s women. Can the Minister confirm whether she agrees with her colleague and thinks that his suggestion of an apprenticeship was really an appropriate one for tens of thousands of women currently being denied their pensions?

Caroline Dinenage: I am delighted that the hon. Lady is considering taking on an apprenticeship, because a very large number of women over the age of 60 are. I do not think that anybody should be forced to take one on, but those who want to should be practically encouraged to do so. Between August 2016 and April 2017, the number of apprenticeship starts for people aged 60 and over was 3,500, an increase on the previous year.
The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): Anyone who believes that they were prevented from bringing an employment tribunal claim because they could not afford to pay the fee can make an application to the tribunal for permission to bring a claim out of time. The tribunal would then consider the application and apply the relevant legal criteria.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is in a muddle. He is supposed to be grouping the question with No. 6, which was the request of his Department to my office to which I agreed, but which he appears to have forgotten.

Dominic Raab: I apologise, Mr Speaker. With permission, I would like to group questions 4 and 6, and I refer to the answer that I have just given.

6. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that women who were unable to pursue pregnancy and maternity discrimination claims due to the cost of employment tribunal fees are able to bring forward their cases. [901060]

Daniel Zeichner: The Government’s research into maternity-related discrimination shows that one in nine mothers reports that they were either dismissed, made redundant or treated so badly that they had to leave their job. Following the Supreme Court case brought by Unison, the union I used to work for, the tribunal would consider the application to the tribunal for permission to bring a claim out of time. The tribunal would then consider the application and apply the relevant legal criteria.

Dominic Raab: The Supreme Court judgment was clear on fees and we immediately stopped charging fees in response. We are putting in place the detailed arrangements to ensure that those who paid fees are refunded. We will shortly announce the practical detail that the hon. Gentleman is looking for. As I indicated a moment ago, those who could not apply to the tribunal because of the fee will now have the opportunity to do so.

Justin Madders: I understand that the Government are considering how to approach the system, but will the Minister rule out any type of up-front fee to access justice in employment tribunals in the future?

Dominic Raab: We are clear that we are accepting the Supreme Court judgment. If the hon. Gentleman would like to read the judgment, he will see that it makes clear that there can be, in principle, a place for fees in the justice system. We need to strike the right balance between taxpayers subsidising the justice system and those who benefit from it making a contribution, but only when they are able to do so.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May I first ask the House to send our best get well wishes to our spokesperson on women and equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who cannot be here today because she was in a car accident last week and is recovering at home?

I was glad to see the Supreme Court rule out tribunal fees because it has been a case of justice denied for so many thousands of women over the past years. There are still barriers for women accessing tribunal fees. The March of the Mummies will take place on Tuesday 31 October to ask specifically for an extension from three to six months to allow women more time to apply for the tribunal fees. Will the Minister meet me and those campaigners on 31 October?

Dominic Raab: First, I join the hon. Lady in extending my condolences and those of the Government to her colleague.

In relation to the Supreme Court judgment, I have to correct her. It was the balance of the fees that was an issue, and the judgment made it clear that it was, in principle, possible to have fees, but I am happy to meet the hon. Lady and look at her suggestions.

Gender Pay Gap

5. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle the gender pay gap.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): The gender pay gap is the lowest it has ever been, but we can do better. We have introduced mandatory gender pay gap reporting for the first time and large employers now have six months left to report their gender pay gaps.

David Hanson: The gender pay gap remains as high as 34% in the east midlands. In my region in Wales, it is now 18%. That is largely due to the efforts of the Welsh Assembly Government in trying to support organisations in Wales, funded by the European social fund. What assessment has the Minister made of the use of that fund to help to close the gender pay gap? Will she examine this, to replicate it post-Brexit?

Justine Greening: We are of course looking at all the European funds we currently have and how we can best ensure that we continue the work that they are doing post-Brexit. We can all do a lot more on this specific issue. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the recent Government Equalities Office employer events, which we have done around the country; I think he attended the one in Cardiff. The key thing is that the transparency requirement now on companies will, as much as anything else, force them to be clear-cut about where their policies lie. We are already seeing that, when that light of transparency is shone on the data, companies are producing action plans that are really making a difference.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Are the Government as committed to eliminating the part-time gender pay gap as they claim to be about eliminating the full-time gender pay gap? Will the Minister set out exactly what they are doing to eliminate the part-time gender pay gap?
Justine Greening: We are absolutely committed to eliminating all the different gender pay gaps. Through the transparency work, we will ensure that companies produce clear-cut action plans that cover all their employees, whether or not they have flexible working arrangements.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Two days ago, the First Secretary of State made a statement to the House on the race disparity audit. He also told the House, as a white man with privilege, that he knew more about race than anyone—a black woman with lived experiences—and Opposition Members, who are a broad church. As there are seven Ministers here today, will the Minister for Women and Equalities highlight seven of her Government’s policies, new or old, over the past seven years—seven is the magic number—that have helped to narrow the inequalities in our country?

Justine Greening: Income inequality is at its lowest level. In the Department of Education alone, we have done significant work to ensure that black and minority ethnic pupils are doing better in school. Like me, the hon. Lady is a London MP and will know that there have been dramatic improvements in educational outcomes for BME communities here in London. More young people from BME communities are going to university than before. In fact, the ethnic group that is now the least likely to go to university in the UK is that of white British males. We are taking action across the board. The important thing about the race disparity audit is that, alongside things such as gender pay gap reporting, it is about using transparency to shine a light on areas where inequalities do still exist. I would like to think that we can work together as a Parliament to tackle those inequalities.

Childcare Responsibilities

7. Fiona Bruce (Conleton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support parents with childcare responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): In relation to progress on childcare, we are taking unprecedented steps to support parents with caring responsibilities, whether by providing tax-free childcare or doubling the provision of free childcare from 15 to 30 hours, and nearly 80% of parents in the early-delivery areas with 30 hours reported that the extended hours had given them more flexibility in their work choices. Of course, the right to request flexible working is also helping parents to balance work and care between them in a way that works for them and their families.

Fiona Bruce: Does the Minister agree that it is important that the message goes out that mothers and fathers who choose to stay at home full time to care for their children, and who often care for those in their wider families and communities, are just as valued and appreciated for their contribution to society as those who of us who go out to work?

Justine Greening: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The approach in our Government policy agenda has been to give choice and to enable families to make the choices that are right for them. For many people, that will involve staying at home, and that is a choice that we also want to support. We have taken steps to equalise the choice for those parents who want to stay in the workplace and continue with careers, so that they can do so while also bringing up a family.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Caring for a terminally ill child can be absolutely devastating for parents. Currently, however, parents in this circumstance are not able to access disability living allowance mobility payments when the child is under three, despite having to carry about often very bulky medical equipment. Will the Government overcome this anomaly and support parents in this absolutely devastating situation?

Justine Greening: Our hearts go out to any parent in what is, as the hon. Lady says, a devastating situation. We have a Minister from the Department for Work and Pensions here today, who I know will take note of what she said. More broadly, we are spending nearly £3.6 billion on carer’s allowance every year. However, I think that we all recognise the responsibility we have as a Government and a community, to support those who are carrying out such vital roles.

Topical Questions

T1. [901087] Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): Last month, I was delighted to be able to speak at the Financial Times Women at the Top summit, urging business leaders to fast-track their plans to address their gender pay gaps.

Similarly, on a separate matter, we will mark the centenary of voting rights being extended to women for the first time, by creating a new £5 million fund to help celebrate this landmark occasion. That will include a £1.5 million scheme specifically for projects run by local and community groups across England. We will set out plans for that shortly, and I hope that many communities will take part practically in those centenary celebrations.

I am delighted to say that the number of girls taking science, technology, engineering and maths A-levels—we saw the results this year—increased by 20% between 2010 and 2017.

Elsewhere on our policy agenda, we have now received over 100,000 responses to the nationwide survey on the views and experiences of LGBT people living in the UK.

Mohammad Yasin: The High Court judgment on Monday found that the Government’s 2016 redefinition of torture for immigration purposes was unlawful. Will the Government now widen the definition of torture so that vulnerable women who have been victims of abuse and trafficking who are currently held in Yarl’s Wood can be immediately released?

Justine Greening: We can be proud of this country’s record on not only fighting torture abroad and improving human rights but being a sanctuary and home for asylum seekers. In relation to the court case the hon. Gentleman mentioned, I have no doubt that Ministers are looking at the judgment carefully and will want to address the issues it raises.
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Earlier this week, we saw new information that shows that the incidence of sexual harassment and sexual violence against girls in our schools is increasing, and that is a year after the Women and Equalities Committee published its inquiry into the subject. What more will the Government do to make sure that their policies are working to keep girls and children safe in our schools?

Justine Greening: As my right hon. Friend points out, we have taken a range of steps already, but the recent report highlights again how significant an issue this is for young people now. As social media become a staple part of young people’s lives to a greater and greater extent, those risks will only grow. She will be aware that we are trying to make sure that the guidance that we provide to schools remains up to date, and that sits alongside other areas of action from the Government such as updating the relationship and sex education guidance. We are clear that if schools see this happening, they should report it to children’s social services or the police—it is vital that they take action.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Schoolgirls in Yorkshire and elsewhere have had to use toilet paper and even socks stuffed into their underwear because families cannot afford sanitary protection due to poverty pay and welfare cuts. Will the Secretary of State consider matching our commitment to set aside funding to tackle period poverty and ensure that girls never miss out on their education just because they are having periods?

Justine Greening: Schools already have discretion over how they can use their funding. If they want to make sanitary products available to disadvantaged students, they are free to do so. The House will recognise that the issue goes far wider than the role of schools: it is also about making sure that parents understand the need to play their role in educating their children and, separately, the clear-cut duty that they have to comply with the law and make sure that their children are attending school.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The Secretary of State referred to the welcome increase in the number of girls doing STEM subjects at A-level. What measures will the Government take to increase the number of girls choosing careers that require STEM subjects?

Justine Greening: The work of the Careers & Enterprise Company will be vital in making sure that employers are plugged into schools and helping to shape careers advice at a much earlier stage, including in primary schools, than in the past. It is welcome that we are now truly building that pipeline of women who will be able to go into those careers. I opened the National College for High Speed Rail earlier this week, and many girls were starting their apprenticeships there, but there is much more work to be done.

T2. [901088]Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): While I welcome the Prime Minister’s initiative to tackle ethnic inequality in targeted areas, including Kirklees, can the Minister explain what that will actually do to improve the lives of my constituents?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It is important that we look closely at the findings of the racial disparity audit that was released this week and work across the Government in every Department—including the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education—to bring forward positive changes to address some of the very uncomfortable findings in the audit.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): We have made incredible progress since women won the right to vote, and I am especially proud of my female colleagues and Ministers and, of course, our second female Prime Minister. What more will the Minister do to increase the number of women in Parliament?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Interestingly, for all political parties—much of this is down to political parties—it is about the pipeline. Only 17% of council leaders are women; only one third of councillors are women; and, shockingly, of the board members of combined authorities, only 4% are women. Next year represents a fantastic opportunity not only to celebrate the centenary, but for all elected representatives to encourage more women to enter public life.

Mr Speaker: I call Catherine West to ask her topical question. Get in there—go for it!

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Sorry, Mr Speaker, but I asked my question earlier; it was about upskirting.

Mr Speaker: Yes, but the hon. Lady is No. 3 at topicals, and therefore if she is fizzing with a further inquiry with which she wishes to favour the House, she is welcome to do so. It is not compulsory.

T3. [901089]Catherine West: May I therefore press the Minister on the period question, because I find her attitude a little harsh and I wonder whether she will review it in the light of what has been said today? I think the matter needs a second look. I think her approach is a little harsh in terms of, first, schools having to stump up money for sanitary pads and, secondly, blaming parents. Periods are just one of those things; we cannot blame parents for periods.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is really getting going now. She required only a modest encouragement.

Justine Greening: As I said, this is clearly an important area, but we have to recognise that we need to allow schools some discretion about how they deal with this alongside a range of other specific issues that the pupils that they teach may face. I do not agree with the hon. Lady; I do think that parents have a responsibility to play their role in making sure that children understand how to approach adult life.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The publication of this week’s racial disparity audit contained many interesting findings, including that Chinese pupils do particularly well at school and that white British males are under-represented in university applications. How will the Minister promote and replicate the first issue and tackle the second?
Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is quite right. He will be aware that our opportunity area work—bearing in mind the communities in which it is being done—is doing a lot to address those issues. We have excellent data in the Department for Education to enable us to look at where we are doing well at improving outcomes for white working-class boys, but we absolutely have to do a lot better. That is why we are taking a much more place-based approach to our education delivery.

Mr Speaker: Seema Malhotra? Not here.

T5. [901091] Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice about adding misogyny to the list of hate crimes?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): We keep all public order offences under constant review. If the hon. Lady would like to make a submission in relation to that, I would be happy to look at it.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is important to ensure that our girls, as well as our boys, get a good education, and the best way to do that is to ensure that we have good teachers. What is the Minister doing to ensure that more girls, as well as boys, go into teaching?

The Minister for Equalities (Nick Gibb): We are determined to increase the number of high-quality graduates coming into teaching, whether they are male or female. We have a series of generous tax-free bursaries of up to £28,000 to encourage the best graduates to come into teaching. We have a very strong economy, so we are competing with industry and commerce for those graduates, but we are doing everything we can to get more good people into teaching.

T6. [901092] Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Can Ministers say what more can be done to eliminate the cruel and barbaric practice of female genital mutilation?

Justine Greening: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have campaigned on this for many years, and we can be proud of the role that the UK has played in helping to tackle this atrocious practice overseas as well as at home. We have introduced FGM protection orders, and most recently the Girl summit was co-hosted by the Department for International Development, of which I was Secretary of State at the time, and by the then Home Secretary, who is now the Prime Minister. There is much more work to be done, but we are more on track than we have ever been in the past. We are, importantly, working with communities on the ground to change cultural attitudes.

Mr Speaker: We are out of time, but I am going to take a question from one more hon. Member who missed out earlier—Gerard Killen.

Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Following yesterday’s High Court decision to allow a full judicial review of the Government’s policy, does the Minister agree that it is time for the UK to join countries such as Ireland and Australia in issuing gender-neutral passports?

Justine Greening: I know that the Home Office will be studying the Court ruling carefully. The Office for National Statistics is also looking generally at how we approach data in relation to gender. I simply say that, although we need to reflect the modern world in which we live, I hope that a bit of common sense can be brought to the matter.
10.39 am

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) (Urgent Question):

To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on prisons policy and the recent disturbance in Her Majesty’s Prison Long Lartin.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I can confirm that there was an incident at HMP Long Lartin last night and that it has now been resolved without injury to staff or prisoners. The incident is of course of concern, and we will need to investigate properly what drove the actions of a relatively small number of individuals. It will take a number of weeks to ensure that all the intelligence is properly examined and that we learn lessons and apply them to prevent any recurrences.

We cannot speculate on the cause of this incident, but we know that the prison was running a full regime and that this was not linked to any shortfalls in prison officer staffing levels. Its last inspection report found the prison to be “calm and controlled” and that, although there were improvements to be made, it was “both competent and effective.”

The incident remained contained on a single wing of the prison, and it involved 81 prisoners. I want to commend the actions of the staff, who acted swiftly in response to the incident. They locked down the wing—and, as I have said, the prison was running a full regime. When situations become volatile, staff in prisons sometimes need extra support, and in this situation our specialist trained prison staff were needed to support the staff in the prison to resolve the incident. They did that very quickly, without harm to staff or prisoners.

In response to the questions about staffing, the shadow spokesperson will be aware that we are investing in our staff in prisons. We are investing £100 million to add 2,500 prison officers by the end of next year. We are on track to deliver that commitment. This year alone we have added a net 868 new prison officers.

The hon. Gentleman is very aware, from his conversations with the chief inspector of prisons and a number of prison governors, that the long-standing challenges facing our prisons are not just about staffing, but new psychoactive substances that the prison ombudsman himself has described as a game-changer for the security and stability of our prisons. We know that staffing would make a huge difference, which is why we are making huge efforts to increase not just the number of staff but the ratio of staff to prisoners, so that one prison officer has a caseload of six prisoners to help with rehabilitation.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Long Lartin prison is in my constituency. I thank the prisons Minister for keeping me up to date on developments throughout the night and for his comments about the professionalism of prison staff. I am relieved that nobody appears to have been seriously injured in this incident and I am very pleased by the speed at which the incident was dealt with. May I ask the Minister for reassurance that the incident will be properly investigated and that any appropriate action will be taken?
Mr Gyimah: I can give my hon. Friend an assurance that there will be a full and proper investigation. There is no point in speculating today on the exact causes of the incident, but there will be a full investigation and lessons learnt. When incidents happen, it is important that we not only deal with them but learn lessons for the future, and we will be doing that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): This is not the first time in recent years that the Government have been called to account in this Chamber for trouble in prisons in England. I note that the Prison Governors Association expressed concern about the fact that this trouble took place in a high security prison and reminded the Government that it had called for an independent public inquiry into the state of prisons in England due to cuts.

In Scotland, we have been fortunate to avoid such problems due to record investment in modernising and improving the prison estate, with the Scottish National party Government spending almost twice as much as the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat Administration on modernising the prison estate. Will the Minister accept an invitation to visit prisons in Scotland to see the good work being done there to avoid this sort of trouble?

Mr Gyimah: I will almost certainly accept the invitation to visit prisons in Scotland. We should always learn from best practice, wherever it is. That is not to say that what is happening in Scotland is necessarily best practice, from best practice, wherever it is. That is not to say that.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is good to see twice as many Ministers on the Treasury Bench as there are spokesmen on the Opposition Front Bench. I thank the Minister for his statement and observe that this is a prison that was described by Her Majesty’s chief inspector as calm and well-controlled. That indicates an underlying issue about the volatility of the prison population. Will the Minister confirm that he is prepared to revisit some of the recommendations made in the Justice Committee’s report on prison safety in the previous Parliament? Will he look again at the way we handle security and mental health, and how we sentence and treat vulnerable offenders who go into the prison population?

Mr Gyimah: I hold the recommendations of the Justice Committee very dearly to my heart. We will of course look at all its recommendations. The Chair of the Select Committee makes a very important point about the prison population. We not only hold some very difficult individuals, but some very troubled individuals. Dealing with issues such as mental health is a key part of dealing with the security and stability of our prisons. It is not just about security solutions.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Two of the three murders in the prison system last year were at Long Lartin. Last week, two individuals were convicted of the murder of a prisoner committed in June in Long Lartin. In the last four years, there have been four murders in Long Lartin. Why does Long Lartin seem to have more murders than any other prison in the country?

Mr Gyimah: The right hon. Gentleman, a former Prisons Minister, will be aware that Long Lartin holds some of the most difficult individuals. It is a category A prison holding some of the most notorious prisoners this country has ever incarcerated. The prisons ombudsman investigates every death, and referring to its report will be the best way to understand what has occurred.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am sure the whole House will want to thank the Tornado team that restored order at Long Lartin last night. I think there is considerable support on both sides of the House and among the public for our taking yet further action on returning foreign national offenders. If the Minister did that, he would create headroom to allow that extra calm that the prison system needs at the moment. I know the numbers have improved, but will he say what further action we can take in that area?

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend, a former Prisons Minister, for his question. Yes, the number of foreign national offenders returned to their home countries has increased. I think the number is about 6,000, but I will confirm the exact number in writing. It is the highest figure in recent years, but we continue to redouble our efforts. A cross-Government group comprising the Policing Minister and the Immigration Minister, as well as Ministers from the Home Office and the Foreign Office, is working actively with foreign Governments to increase the rate at which foreign national offenders are returned to their home country.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): While it is reassuring to hear the Minister say that no staff were physically hurt during the disturbance, these events are not supposed to happen and can be terrifying for the staff present. Will he make sure that staff receive the support they might need in the coming weeks to deal with what happened and that no staff member is forced to come back to work before they are ready?

Mr Gyimah: The staff were brilliant last night and are brilliant today. We also have an excellent governor, to whom I have conveyed my full support. Yes, we need to give them all the support they need, and I will put it on the record again that we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for managing on a day-to-day basis not just isolated incidences such as last night’s, but a very difficult and challenging situation in our prisons.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am grateful for the Minister’s confirmation that this was an isolated incident confined to one section of the prison and that the public were not at risk. Will he also confirm that the staffing level in that section of the prison was as normal?

Mr Gyimah: I can confirm not only that there was a full regime but that the number of prison officer staff on the wing was as normal.
Mr Gyimah: That is a very interesting question. As a former Minister, the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that it is not for the Minister to pronounce on sentencing policy at the Dispatch Box. Of course, we want to reduce the prison population, but one of the best ways to do that is to reduce reoffending rates and to end the conveyor belt into crime by intervening before people end up in custody. That is more effective than arbitrarily letting people out of prison.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If the Minister wants a zero-tolerance approach, may I suggest he change the law so that anybody involved in riots in prisons or assaults or attacks on prison officers is no longer eligible for early release but has to serve the full sentence handed down by the courts? That would give prison officers some of the support they deserve and would perhaps act as a deterrent to these appalling kinds of behaviour.

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend has asked this question of me a number of times. He will be aware that a prisoner who is a perpetrator of a crime in prison will be prosecuted for that specific crime and, if convicted, will serve that sentence, and that has certainly happened in the case of the perpetrators of the Birmingham riots last year. That is a fair and just way to deal with this kind of situation.

Mr Speaker: There is of course no procedural barrier to repeat questions, which many people regard as an example of dogged and insistent campaigning.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): That was a really interesting answer, because the heroin dealer Ian Paul Manuel beat up prison officer Adam Jackson at Kirklevington prison in Stockton, and the courts gave him a conditional discharge and ordered him to pay £20 compensation to the officer. Does the Minister agree that such a slap on the wrist is totally inadequate, that it offers no deterrent at all to the thugs who turn on prison officers and that it is time the courts were given clear advice that they, too, have a responsibility to protect prison officers?

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely: our prison officers do a very difficult and challenging job, and when they are assaulted or threatened at work, we should follow the course of the law to its full extent. To do that—[Interruption]—if the hon. Gentleman would listen—there are a number of things we need to get right, such as collecting evidence, making sure that the local police force is on hand to prevent the use of drones to bring contraband into prisons?

Mr Gyimah: Our high-security estate does not lack the resources that it needs for the purposes of security or maintaining a regime. In fact, such prisons have higher staffing ratios because of the difficult people with whom they deal. Of course, if situations change and they need more staff or any other resources to cope with that, such resources will always be available.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Clearly, the background to this disturbance will be investigated, but can the Minister outline what the Government are doing to prevent the use of drones to bring contraband into prisons?

Mr Gyimah: Drones are an emerging and serious threat to our prisons, especially as they carry an increasing payload as they develop. We are working with a number of drone manufacturers to use technology to stop drones, but we are also focusing on the law enforcement aspect.

Before I became the Prisons Minister, there had been only one conviction of a person flying a drone into a prison. This year alone there have been 11 convictions of people flying drones into prison. That is because we are working with the Home Office forensics team, examining drones that fail, going after the perpetrators through the forensic work we are doing and ensuring that they face the full force of the law. It has become apparent that those involved in serious and organised crime are often behind such activity, and we are sending a signal that we will go after them.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will the Minister visit Amsterdam for a relaxing weekend, to study the special prison crisis they have in Holland, which is a lack of prisoners to fill their prisons? They have had to close 19 of them down. Will he examine the contrast between the intelligent, pragmatic policies on drugs of the Dutch over the last 50 years and the harsh, unintelligent policies that we have had in this country? The Government there have shown a welcome desire to reflect on the failed drug policies here and introduce new measures that reflect the reality of the situation, in having drug houses that can be used and possibly looking again at imprisoning people for using the medicine of their choice. Is it not time we decided who has got it right over the last five years: the Netherlands or us?

Mr Gyimah: I think the Government Whips would be slightly concerned if I accepted another invitation to go abroad to visit prisons, but the substance of the hon. Gentleman’s point is very interesting when it comes to dealing with people who are on drugs in prison. It is about dealing with the supply side and the demand side, but also getting people off drugs. Holland clearly has a very different approach to its prison system. As I have said in relation to Scotland, I am willing to learn from all different jurisdictions to see how we can improve what we are doing here.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Does the Minister intend to make extra resources or help available to prison governors at high-security prisons, to ensure that our prisons are calm and well controlled?

Mr Gyimah: Our high-security estate does not lack the resources that it needs for the purposes of security or maintaining a regime. In fact, such prisons have higher staffing ratios because of the difficult people with whom they deal. Of course, if situations change and they need more staff or any other resources to cope with that, such resources will always be available.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister simply cannot pretend that we will not see further outbreaks of this kind of rioting in our prisons, and he cannot pretend that prisons are not in any case regularly very violent places. As long as we have overcrowded prisons and too few staff, these events will continue to take place. The Minister must look seriously at non-custodial options for the courts when it comes to low-level criminals for whom such options would be more effective, as well as being cheaper. Why is that not already being done?

Mr Gyimah: I am not suggesting for a second that such incidents will not be repeated. We try to mitigate and manage risk, but there is always a chance that something like this could happen again. As I have said,
what is happening in the high-security estate is a rare occurrence. Of course, as I have also said, the level of violence in our prisons is too high, but dealing with the issues that have led to the current situation—drugs, drugs, and illegal mobile phones—will take time. We are investing in staff and our intelligence network; we are working on drone detection equipment; and we are working on mobile-phone blockers, but there is no silver bullet to deal with the issue in our prisons, and doing so will take time.

No one here is saying that this will not happen again. We must all be frank with ourselves: prisons are difficult places with some very difficult people to manage, and because of the particular set of circumstances that we face, it will take time to resolve the situation.

Mr Gyimah: That is an excellent point. The Tornado teams are the bravest of the brave. As we saw last night, they deal with some of the most difficult situations, and the fact that they can be mobilised relatively quickly to arrive at a prison and offer support to its frontline staff is testimony to their effectiveness and professionalism. Of course we would prefer not to have to deploy them, but when there are problems and a need to protect the public and prison officers and maintain stability and order in our prisons, they are second to none.

Mr Gyimah: The 2,500 target is obviously based on careful analysis of what we need to deliver the offender management model, which means one prison officer having a six-prisoner caseload, and it should be capable of allowing us to do so.

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Mr Gyimah: New psychoactive substances are a game-changer. They are particularly difficult to detect. There have been instances of letters to prisoners being impregnated with them: looking at such a letter makes it possible to inhale the drug and to suffer the adverse consequences.

We have trained 300 sniffer dogs to help us with detection, and the UK is the first jurisdiction to develop a test for such drugs. We are redoubling our efforts to deal with the supply side by increasing investment in intelligence. We are investing £3 million, not just at establishment level but across the prison estate, so that we can deal with what is essentially a product of serious and organised crime. People want to get drugs into our prisons because they sell at a higher mark-up: 10 times the price outside.
Mr Gyimah: We have some excellent trainees coming into the Prison Service. For example, one trainee I met had spent seven years in the NHS and was being deployed in HMP Woodhill, a prison where there have been high rates of self-harm and also self-inflicted deaths. That person is more experienced in dealing with the problems that prison is facing today than many who have been in the Prison Service for a long time. These are not raw recruits; in some cases, they are bringing new experience to the Prison Service. In the second world war, someone could be a bomber pilot at the age of 20, so I think someone can serve in the Prison Service at the age of 21 as well.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If we want to significantly reduce the number of foreign nationals in our prisons, we need compulsory prisoner transfer agreements in place with countries around the world, so our prisons are EU nationals. While we are a member of the EU, we are meant to be under the prisoner transfer directive. How many EU national prisoners have been sent back to the EU countries they came from?

Mr Gyimah: I do not have that exact figure to hand but am willing to write to my hon. Friend with the answer.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): This month the inspectorate reported that there was a major under-prescription of methadone at Low Moss prison near my constituency and also of the anti-overdose drug naloxone. Will the Minister consider the impact that the under-prescribing of these critical drugs may have on the safety of the prison population?

Mr Gyimah: If the hon. Gentleman is willing to write to me, I will be happy to look at that specific situation; it sounds as though it is a situation specific to that prison.

Valerie Vaz: Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 16 October will be:

**Monday 16 October**—Second Reading of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill.

**Tuesday 17 October**—The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration followed by a debate on a motion on the persecution of the Rohingya by the Myanmar Government. The subject of this debate was nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Wednesday 18 October**—Opposition day (2nd allotted day). There will be a debate entitled “Pause and Fix of roll-out of universal credit” on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

**Thursday 19 October**—Debate on a motion on the tobacco control plan, followed by a debate on a motion relating to valproate and foetal anti-convulsant syndrome. The subjects of these debates were nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Friday 20 October**—Private Members’ Bills.

I am delighted that next week we will have the first debates from the Backbench Business Committee and the first private Members’ Bills sitting Friday, and I look forward to hearing many interesting contributions from Members right across the House. I take this opportunity to welcome all Members back after the conference recess for what I am sure will be a very busy time in the run-up to Christmas.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I call Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As well as my weekly—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I do beg the pardon of the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). I am not bothered about the right hon. Gentleman—I do not have to beg his pardon; I have known him for 34 years. It is no use his smiling beatifically at me. I call Valerie Vaz.

Valerie Vaz: I am wearing pink, Mr Speaker, so I thought you might have noticed that I was sitting here.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the forthcoming business. Did the she really announce the Second Reading of a Bill that had its First Reading and was published yesterday? I have looked at the Bill, and it is riddled with delegated powers to Ministers. Is this an acceptable way for the Government to behave—with no scrutiny? In addition, the Leader of the House has announced only one week’s business, whereas her predecessor used to announce the business for two weeks. Are the Government in such chaos that they do not even know what is happening from one week to the next?

Mr Speaker: This is a fiasco. I think we are running out of words. There is a new lexicon for constitutional outrage—I will have to consult my thesaurus. This is terrible. It is actually quite a serious matter, because it is
a contempt of the democratic process. I am trying to make light of it, to see whether we can get some movement, but we cannot.

I note there was no reference in the Leader of the House’s statement to a debate on restoration and renewal. Whereas we all want the works to be done. Members on both sides of the House will be keen to see the Government’s motion, particularly as, in response to a written question tabled in the other place, Lord Young of Cookham said that a motion and debate was likely “in the autumn”, although he failed to say which year. Can the Leader of the House confirm that that will be autumn 2017?

Will the Leader of the House ensure that the list of ministerial responsibilities is updated? The Prime Minister confirmed ministerial appointments on 20 June 2017, and I do not know whether there is any reason—we are waiting for an announcement—why the new list cannot be published. Members need to know which Minister to write to. The last list was published in December 2016.

I want to clarify a question that was raised on Tuesday. An hon. Member asked, “Where does it say in ‘Erskine May’ that the Government have to vote?” Well, chapter 21 of “Erskine May” deals with debates. At the conclusion of a speech of a Member moving a motion, the Question is always proposed by you, Mr Speaker, or the Chair, and voices are called when the Question is put on every motion. The Government are either for or against a policy, and if they abstain, they have to tell the House—and the country—exactly what their position is on that policy. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) made a pertinent point in Tuesday’s debate when, as a true parliamentarian, he said that the Government could actually make a statement on what that policy was within a reasonable time, so they would not have needed to have do so before the conference recess.

The Prime Minister yesterday referred to the Labour party conference, but she failed to mention that when she spoke at a conference, there were cries of, “F off!” Actually, that was people saying that the letter “F” had fallen off the back of the platform. Her Majesty’s Labour party had no problem with our F’s—ours was “For the many, not the few.” Maybe our message has more stick-ability.

During Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, the Prime Minister failed to answer when the Leader of the Opposition asked whether she agreed with the former Prime Minister, John Major, when he said that universal credit is “operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving.”

Croydon Council, which piloted the roll-out, has said that it wants a pause. Mayor Burnham has said that homelessness will increase. The National Housing Federation has expressed its concerns. Members on both sides of the House and the Work and Pensions Committee have called for a Christmas truce. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions actually comes to the House on next week’s Opposition day with a position? People are being pushed into rent arrears and poverty.

The Government are always saying that the NHS is not being privatised, so will the Leader of the House please say why Public Health England is reviewing whether free travel vaccinations for diphtheria, tetanus, cholera, typhoid and hepatitis A should be stopped?

Does she agree that they should remain free? Their removal could pose a huge risk to the community. May we have a statement to say that those vaccinations should remain free?

It is National Libraries Week, and I would like the Chancellor’s autumn Budget to provide local authorities with enough money so that South Walsall, Pheasey and Pleck libraries in my constituency can be reopened. Our children are losing out.

Yesterday was World Mental Health Day, and I will be presenting on your behalf, Mr Speaker, a Speaker’s School Council Award in the 17-to-19 category to Queen Mary’s Grammar School in my constituency for its “change your mind” project. The aim of the scheme is to increase awareness and discussion of potential mental health issues, particularly for those in years 6 and 7 who are making the transition to senior school, and that message has already been taken out to six primary schools.

Sunday is the last day for the old £1 coin, and David Pearce, a pupil at Queen Mary’s, was the winner of the contest to design the new coin. The winner was chosen by George Osborne, who in a nice move actually telephoned David to tell him. I am sure that the House will join me in wishing headteacher Tim Swain, the teachers, the parents and, of course, the pupils for their continued success and commitment to public service.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady on having a fantastic school in her constituency. I am sure we would all like to congratulate Queen Mary’s Grammar School on its excellent work on World Mental Health Day, and we have seen work done right across the country. I also pay tribute to the excellent efforts of the parent-infant partnerships right across the UK that help families who are struggling to bond with their newborn babies. Cross-party consensus has been reached on the need for help in the earliest years. I also congratulate the school on its excellent work in contributing to the shape and design of the new £1 coin. I was not aware of that, and the House sends many congratulations.

The hon. Lady mentioned Second Reading of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill. I assure all Members that the Bill will be debated and scrutinised in absolutely the usual way. I have said many times at the Dispatch Box that I am absolutely keen to hear from Members if they have ideas about how to improve Bills or scrutiny. She also referred to the business for the week after next, but there has frequently been no such advance notice. We are hopeful for some good news from Northern Ireland that may allow for legislation to recreate the Northern Ireland Executive, and other legislation can also come up at the last minute. It is important that we provide as much notice as possible, but it is perfectly normal to announce only one week’s business.

As for restoration and renewal, I can confirm that the debate will come in autumn 2017. The hon. Lady and I both sit on the House of Commons Commission, which you chair, Mr Speaker, so she will be well up to date with my determination to see some progress. I was not aware that the list of ministerial responsibilities had not been updated. I sincerely apologise to the House for that and will look into it straight after business questions.

The hon. Lady talked about F’s, and I am slightly bemused by the various F’s that are going on. As far as I am aware, nobody is going to “F off” and that is good.
news. Whatever happened during the party conferences, the Conservative Prime Minister made some excellent policy announcements, not least the excellent proposals to reform the energy market, which is so much in the interests of this country’s consumers.

The hon. Lady asked about universal credit. As she will be aware, the policy is designed to help people to get back into work. It reduces the complexity of six benefits by replacing them with one. It is incredibly important and is showing progress in helping people to get into work. We absolutely take on board the concerns: all of us as constituency MPs always have issues with individual constituents whom we need to do more to help during the implementation. Nevertheless, it is a good policy.

I take on board the hon. Lady’s point about the review of vaccinations. I am not aware of that specific review of those particular vaccinations, but I am sure that the Secretary of State for Health will take her views on board.

We are all keen on National Libraries Week and we will continue to support our libraries. We thank all those volunteers who do so much to keep our libraries going. That is a great thing to be doing.

Mr Speaker: I call the good doctor—Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis: Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is always worth waiting for a good opportunity.

As well as my perennial request for a statement about what steps the Government will take to protect our Northern Ireland service veterans from pursuit in the courts, perhaps I may ask for a good news statement about the progress made by so many schools and colleges in GCSEs and A-levels in recent weeks and months.

Andrea Leadsom: I believe that that was two questions; we are all keeping count. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his assiduous focus on good news stories for this country. He is right to raise them and I certainly join him in congratulating all those who achieved so excellently in our schools and higher education colleges with GCSEs and A-levels, and in other forms of higher education such as apprenticeships, under this Conservative Government.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

Well, that was a successful conference recess for the right hon. Lady and her party! They have all returned full of peace, love and understanding, all united—well, the Brexiteers are all united against the Chancellor anyway. We desperately need an urgent debate about the consequences of a no-deal hard Brexit if that lot are seriously contemplating going down that route. Already there are claims that that could cost up to £400 billion and suck 18% of GDP out of our economy. No country in history has ever considered committing economic self-harm on such a scale before. We need to know the Government’s views about the costs, and the issue needs urgently to be debated.

What we do not need, Mr Speaker, is for you to have to grant any more emergency debates about the behaviour of the right hon. Lady. She needs to accept the Government’s minority status in the House, obey the democratic structures of the House and seek not to circumvent our arrangements, which protect the rights of all Back Benchers.

There has still been no statement on the situation in Catalonia. If people were getting beaten up for voting and ballot boxes were being confiscated anywhere else in the world, the Government would be indignant and a Minister would race to the Chamber. Just because the situation involves a supposed friend on mainland Europe does not excuse the Government from simply ignoring this appalling state repression.

Lastly, when are we going to see the repeal Bill? We thought that the right hon. Lady would say a bit about that today. As she knows, the Bill is still unacceptable to the Scottish Government, who are not prepared to give it a legislative consent motion. We are not prepared to have our devolution settlement undermined, or our Parliamentemasculated and made subject to this unprecedented power grab. What is she doing to fix the situation?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has given us a tour de force. I think he was asking about expenditure in the event of all outcomes of the negotiations to leave the EU. He should feel absolutely reassured that, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, all outcomes are being considered, assessed and prepared for, including the spending of money as necessary on contingency arrangements to ensure that, whatever the outcome of negotiations, there is a strong and secure future for the United Kingdom. It is our intention, plan and expectation that we will have a very good outcome from EU withdrawal, along with our EU friends and neighbours. That is our absolute intention.

The hon. Gentleman mentions Catalonia, and all Members were distressed, as were all people in the country, to see the level of violence there. It can never be right to inflict violence against innocent people, and that is absolutely clear. Spain is a key ally of the United Kingdom. It has a strong constitution, and it is absolutely right that it resolves this issue not only constitutionally, but in a secure way that respects the rights of individuals.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the repeal Bill. I believe he was asking when the sittings of the Committee of the whole House will be scheduled. What I can say to all Members is that some 300 amendments and 54 new clauses have been proposed—and rightly so—by Members who have concerns about the Bill. Those proposals are being closely evaluated. That is taking a bit of time so that we give proper, thoughtful, well considered responses to them. We will, of course, be bringing forward the Committee of the whole House just as soon as we are able to do so.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): In January 2016, Cannock Chase High School was rated as outstanding by Ofsted. Inofsted recognised the positive impact that has resulted from the improvements that are being made. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating all the staff and pupils at the school on that progress? May I use this as another request for either a statement or debate about schools and, in particular, improving standards?

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted to join colleagues in congratulating a particular school, and it does sound as though this one has great news to celebrate, so I am
happy to echo my hon. Friend in that. All colleagues will be delighted to know that 1.8 million more children are in good and outstanding schools than was the case in 2010, when this party came into office.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): May I just correct my hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House, as World Mental Health Day was on Tuesday, not yesterday? It is always on 10 October, and we should never forget that.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s businesses and, in particular, for advertising the wares of the Backbench Business Committee. On Tuesday, there is opposed private business, and I do not yet know what form this will take. I also do not know whether there will be any statements or urgent questions on that day, but we will have a heavily supported debate on the Rohingya and Myanmar. Is there any chance that the Leader of the House could protect the time for that important debate, so that as many right hon. and hon. Members as possible will have an opportunity to contribute to it?

In tune with the shadow Leader of the House, may I also ask that we get early notice of any future time for Backbench Business Committee debates? We have a list of unheard debates, and we will be making considerations next Tuesday, so will the Leader of the House let us know as soon as possible what time will be allocated to us in future weeks?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said, I am delighted that we are having two days of Backbench Business Committee debates next week. I will always endeavour to let the hon. Gentleman know as soon as possible when Backbench Business Committee time can be given. On his point about protecting time for the incredibly important debate on the plight of the Rohingya people, I have absolutely heard his request, and I will look into it to see what can be done.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate the Government on their response to the unfortunate demise of Monarch Airlines, but I wish to call for a debate on the pension fund of former employees of that company. Many of my constituents who were employed by Monarch are deeply concerned about that.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising a really important point about Monarch workers’ pensions. I am proud that the jobcentre rapid response service has looked quickly at the future for any employees made redundant from Monarch. People are naturally concerned about their pensions. The Insolvency Service can make payments out of the national insurance fund for unpaid pension contributions, subject to statutory limits, and I am sure that he will want to raise this issue at the next Work and Pensions questions.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff’ North) (Lab): S4C, the Welsh language public service broadcaster based in my constituency, is undergoing a review, which was announced in August. Will the Government be making a statement on that review? When can we expect any announcement that will guarantee S4C’s future as a unique and valuable broadcaster in Wales, offering quality and innovation?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the work of the Welsh language channel, which is vital; I have come across it in previous roles and think it does a fantastic job. I do not know the answer to the hon. Lady’s question, but she can certainly write to me and I will find out for her; or I am sure that Ministers from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport will be happy to answer her directly.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that, given the leadership vacuum in Police Scotland since the chief constable stepped aside last month and the chair of the authority resigned in June, it would now be irresponsible and reckless for the Scottish National party Scottish Government to continue with their merger of the British Transport police into Police Scotland? May we have a statement to update Members on the discussions between the UK and Scottish Governments, with particular reference to the concerns of BTP officers and staff in Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: In his short time in the House, my hon. Friend has shown that he is a strong voice for his constituents and for Scotland. He will be aware that, under the Scotland Act 2016, the issues he raises are matters for the Scottish Parliament. Nevertheless, although they are devolved, it is important that, as the Prime Minister has said, this Parliament does not devolve and forget, so the UK Government are engaging with the Scottish Government on the transfer arrangements to make sure that the overall level of policing—including police across the border—remains as effective as it is today.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Next Wednesday is national Anti-Slavery Day, when there will be an event at which various awards will be given out to people, courtesy of Mr Speaker, who will also be speaking at the event, for which we are very grateful. The House is united in trying to tackle modern slavery and human trafficking. Has the Leader of the House had any indication that any member of the Government will come to the House next Wednesday to talk about the progress in tackling this horrific issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his becoming the co-chair of the all-party group on human trafficking and modern slavery. I know that the issue is of great importance to him and to you, Mr Speaker. It is also of great importance to the Prime Minister, who was absolutely behind the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. It is a horrific problem that is still taking place on our streets every day, but the UK is at the forefront of tackling this evil. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will find a way to make sure that the Government come to the House to make a statement on progress.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): You must be cheered up today, Mr Speaker; in all the time I have been in Parliament, I have never heard a Leader of the House ask Members to suggest ways to increase scrutiny. That is a triumph for the current Leader of the House, who will be so good at this. One thing that we could do urgently is to require a statement from a Minister within four weeks of the House making a decision on a substantive motion, whether it is in a Backbench Business
debate or on an Opposition day. As we go into a situation in which there will be a lot of delegated legislation under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, a statement about substantive motions would help to reassure the House.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has made this suggestion several times, and I am interested in it and would like to discuss it with him further. My concern is that such a process could lead to the downgrading of the quality of debate, because it would effectively mean that the Government could just reply after the fact. Nevertheless, I am interested in what my hon. Friend has to say and would be delighted to have him buy me a drink so that we can discuss it further.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Scunthorpe market provides around 250 local jobs and is well valued by its customers, yet its future is currently at risk because of the behaviour of North Lincolnshire Council. May we have a debate about the role of markets in local communities and councils’ roles in supporting them?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. Market towns, of which I have two in my constituency, are incredibly important to our communities and we should do everything we can to sustain them. I thoroughly recommend that he use the good offices of the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns); I am sure there would be enthusiasm across the House for such a debate.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the welfare of British subjects detained in Dubai? One such individual is one of my Stirling constituents. He is currently being detained in Dubai, and, as the House will understand, there is much concern for his wellbeing and prospects.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. A number of our constituents are held overseas in circumstances that we as MPs become very concerned about. I think that I know the case to which he refers, and I point out to him that he might want to consider whether he has got the facts right. If he has, I point out to him that he might want to raise this matter with the Foreign Office, when he can raise this matter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am absolutely happy to share with the House the value of co-operation—I am absolutely happy to share with the House the value of co-operation. I was a member of the Co-operative movement—marched down to Westminster Hall and founded the Co-operative party, of which I and many of my hon. Friends are proud members. Can we have a debate or on an Opposition day. As we go into a situation in which there will be a lot of delegated legislation under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, a statement about substantive motions would help to reassure the House.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has made this suggestion several times, and I am interested in it and would like to discuss it with him further. My concern is that such a process could lead to the downgrading of the quality of debate, because it would effectively mean that the Government could just reply after the fact. Nevertheless, I am interested in what my hon. Friend has to say and would be delighted to have him buy me a drink so that we can discuss it further.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Scunthorpe market provides around 250 local jobs and is well valued by its customers, yet its future is currently at risk because of the behaviour of North Lincolnshire Council. May we have a debate about the role of markets in local communities and councils’ roles in supporting them?

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Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Mr Speaker, you were 100% right to have said in a recent speech that the House of Commons belongs to all its Members on behalf of the people and not just to those Members who happen to serve in ministerial office and that therefore this House should have the ability, in cases of emergency, to recall itself and not wait for the Government to do so. Does the Leader of the House agree, given that, as well as being a member of the Government, she is also meant to be a representative of the Members of this House to the Government? If she does, what will she do about it?
Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, I found your speech yesterday very thought provoking with some extremely interesting ideas, particularly the idea that Back-Bench MPs could recall Parliament. I am sure we will hear more about that interesting idea and I shall certainly be listening.

Mr Speaker: Hmm, yes.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate, which I suggest should be led by the Cabinet Office, to enable Ministers from different Departments to set out the costs of Brexit? They could set out, for instance, the cost of the contingency plans, the cost to the 50 different sectors set out in the sectorial reports that we are not allowed to see and the cost of the Nissan deal and any other secret deals with car manufacturers. It would also enable Ministers, like the Leader of the House, to set out exactly what they had said during the EU referendum campaign about what the cost of leaving the European Union would be for the taxpayer.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely disagree with most of the right hon. Gentleman’s points. He is clearly seeking to fulfil the Liberal Democrats’ ambition of denying the right hon. Gentleman’s points. He is clearly seeking justice is done and that we are fair to the person who is taking up this case. We all have individual cases about which we are concerned because we want to ensure that a proper review of this case and see common sense prevailed.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ask the Secretary of State for Transport to make a statement on the work of the National Infrastructure Commission and the progress of major projects—in particular, to give a timescale for the implementation of the northern hub and to say why there are such lengthy delays to Crossrail 2?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure my hon. Friend has some specific points in mind about which he is concerned, and I urge him to raise them at Transport questions on Thursday 19 October.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent’s daughter, Amy, is a United States citizen who has lived in the United Kingdom for 10 years. She has graduated from university and has been successfully running her own business, yet she has been refused a renewal of her entrepreneurial visa. Her appeal was nothing more than a tick-box exercise. She has been visited twice by Home Office agents and her mental health is suffering as a result of the situation. Will the Leader of the House commit to getting a Minister to do a proper review of this case and see common sense about somebody who is contributing to the UK economy?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Gentleman for taking up this case. We all have individual cases about which we are concerned because we want to ensure that justice is done and that we are fair to the person who is contributing so much as well as to our own rules and regulations. I am sure that the Home Office will be keen to look into the matter for him if he wants to take it up with the Department directly.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Leader of the House—and perhaps you, Mr Speaker—may not be aware that the Westminster dog of the year competition will be held in two weeks’ time. Although the event may seem somewhat frivolous, there is a serious point behind it: raising the subject of good animal care and welfare. The Government take these issues seriously, recently raising the sentences for animal cruelty to five years. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming that move by the Government and in wishing everyone good luck in Westminster dog of the year, which helps to promote animal welfare? If she has a spare moment on 26 October, I know that the Dogs Trust would welcome a late entry. Indeed, Mr Speaker, you might think about coming along as well.

Mr Speaker: I was not proposing to enter myself and I do not have a dog. We have a cat called Order and my son has a tortoise.

Andrea Leadsom: I see you as something of a springer spaniel, Mr Speaker. I am not sure whether I would qualify because I sadly do not have a dog or even a tortoise. I would love to have both but life seems to get in the way. My hon. Friend made an important point, though. We are a nation of dog lovers. When I was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I was totally delighted to preside over a change in puppy licensing laws, which has gone a great way towards helping in the welfare of puppies and dogs. I am also delighted with our changes to animal cruelty sentencing. I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising a point that may appear trivial but that is actually very dear to us all. I offer good luck and best wishes to every entrant.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The national health service is under immense pressure from under-resourcing, but also from the heavy and continuing burdens arising from alcohol abuse. May we have a full debate in Government time on how the Government propose to address this serious problem?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important issue. Alcohol abuse is certainly enormously to the detriment of people’s lives in this country, but it also adds enormously to the financial imposition on the NHS, given the burden of care involved in dealing with the ramifications of excessive alcohol abuse. The hon. Gentleman may well wish to raise this directly with the Department of Health and to look for a specific opportunity to talk about the impact of alcohol abuse on the NHS.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House provide time for the Business Secretary to address the threatened closure of the Britvic and Colman’s factories in Norwich, which could lead to job losses for hundreds of my constituents? I have written to the Business Secretary, and I hope the Leader of the House can assure me that he will respond. He was able to intervene in the Nissan case last year, and if he can do that for Nissan, he can do the same for my constituents. Anything less just will not cut the mustard.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to speak up for his constituents, and I can assure him that the Business Secretary will reply—of course
he will, as the hon. Gentleman would expect. The hon. Gentleman may wish to call an Adjournment debate, and he will then have a Minister here who can directly address the issues he is concerned about.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Show Racism the Red Card, and the Leader of the House will be aware that there is a fortnight of action, so can we have a debate or a statement in Government time on the funding of that organisation? Does she agree that it is great that the football community is in schools such as St Constantine's Primary School and Ibrox Primary School in my constituency talking to kids and encouraging anti-racism activity?

Andrea Leadsom: I think we can all agree that football has a really good part to play in providing a role model for young people, where it seeks to do that—it can also be a bit of a problem on occasion. However, the example the hon. Gentleman gives of football being used as a means to motivate and inspire young people in schools is very valuable, and if he wanted to apply for an Adjournment debate, I am sure you would look very favourably on the matter, Mr Speaker.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know what the Government have against the children of York, but we are going to experience real funding cuts to all the schools across the city—in fact we are going to move from being the seventh worst funded authority to the very worst funded authority. When will the Government have a debate in their time to discuss the new funding formula?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue, and we would all want to pay tribute to the amazing contribution made by our armed forces, often at a high price for them personally and individually. She will be pleased to know that on 9 October the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Foundation publicly announced their new partnership to try to reduce further the residual stigma of mental ill-health across the defence community. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence is very concerned about this issue, and the hon. Lady may want to raise her concerns about that centre directly with him.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): On 3 June, London Bridge and Borough Market in my constituency were attacked by terrorists, leaving eight dead and shutting the area down for 10 days at a cost of £1.4 million to local businesses. The Borough Market Trust has done a huge amount to raise public and business-to-business support; the council has provided £100,000 in rate relief; and the Mayor of London has provided £175,000 in support. Despite meetings between traders and Business and Treasury Ministers, not 1p of Government support has been provided and insurers such as Aviva have yet to make pay-outs. Will the Leader of the House re-examine what emergency support the Government offer in the aftermath of terror attacks and provide Government time to debate the publicly funded pool reinsurance system?

Andrea Leadsom: The whole House was incredibly impressed by the way the traders and communities in the London Bridge area came together after the appalling terror attack, and we all pay tribute to the work that they did. The hon. Gentleman makes the point that contributions have been made by local government, which does of course receive funding from central Government so that it can support local communities. I understand the point he makes, however, and he may wish to raise a specific issue in an Adjournment debate. The Government provide support in many ways for recovery after these horrendous attacks, and it is right that we will continue to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Andrew Brunson, a Protestant pastor, who led a small church congregation in the western Turkish city of Izmir, was arrested in October 2016. He has faced unsubstantiated accusations in the Turkish media. Erdogan's offer of a prisoner swap for Andrew Brunson is an unfortunate confession by the Turkish president that the pastor is a pawn held hostage by Ankara. May we have a statement or debate on the suppression of human rights in Turkey, in particular for those of a Christian faith?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that case. The Government are firmly committed to protecting the right to freedom of religion and belief around the world and to being a strong voice in defence of that fundamental right. The persecution of Christians and those of any other faith is of profound concern to us and we are active in condemning any such persecutions.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I have been made aware that constituents taking advantage of the call-back service on the universal credit helpline commonly wait at least 12 minutes to get through, which costs some £7 on a mobile, equating—as I am sure the Leader of the House is aware—to an hour's wages for some people. Universal credit is on its way to my constituency and my constituents are already contacting me because they are worried about the implications. Does the Leader of the House agree with the 55p a minute cost of calls to the helpline and may we have a debate on that specific issue?
Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady’s concern that we have to do everything that we can to make claiming universal credit as easy as possible. I rang the universal credit helpline myself just before business questions to see how long it takes. Clearly, there is the facility for call-back, and if the hon. Lady has evidence that it takes too long for that to be provided, the DWP will look at it. It has made clear its commitment to ensuring that the process is fair to claimants. Of course, 99% of all universal credit claims are made online, and jobcentres have facilities for people to access digital services and be helped to make an application online.

I would just like to point out to the House that universal credit is a good policy. It is designed to help people get back into work, to reduce six benefits to one and to make the system less confusing and less capable of causing a problem.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): May I begin by putting on the record the great sadness of many of my constituents at the recent death of Sir Teddy Taylor, who served my constituency for 15 years? It is a privilege to represent his old stomping ground, where his name looms large to this day.

During the recess, Mr Speaker, you visited two schools in my constituency, and I am quite sure that the young people there told you about their experiences of cyber-bullying and having social media platforms used against them. [Interruption.] I say to hon. Members who are screeching from a sedentary position that this deserves a bit more respect. There is deep confusion at what the Government are doing in this regard. The Culture Secretary yesterday said that legislating on this would be ideological and too difficult. May we have a statement from the Culture Secretary on how she intends to clamp down on companies such as Facebook being used to make a misery of young people’s lives?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Sir Teddy Taylor. I do not agree that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was at all confusing yesterday. I heard her say very clearly that, ideally, to address this issue more quickly, organisations, because it takes longer to legislate. It is crucial that, ideally, to address this issue more quickly, we need to support this important industry.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have the debate that has been missing for so long on the importance of the UK textile and fashion industry to the economy? The industry contributes almost £21 billion each year. There are very real concerns in the industry regarding Brexit, and it is crucial that we support this important industry.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady on raising a subject that is, I know, very important to you, Mr Speaker, with your clear personal commitment to fashion and design. She raises a very good point, and I urge her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the importance of this industry, in which the UK is, if not leading the world, a key player in the sector. It is a growing success story for the United Kingdom.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): May we have a debate on early-day motion 372, so that I can enjoy the lifetime first experience of congratulating the Government on an intelligent drugs policy of approving safe injecting rooms?

[That this House believes that it is the duty of the good citizen to challenge laws that oppress the sick and the powerless and deny them their medicine of choice; congratulates the United Patients Alliance for its act of mass civil disobedience in challenging the discredited, cruel and unenforceable law that criminalises thousands of seriously ill patients for using natural cannabis to relieve symptoms of severe pain and spasm; and thanks the police for its wise restraint and the Multiple Sclerosis Society, two police and crime commissioners and hon. Members for their support for a new compassionate and practical reform of medicinal cannabis to replace the present irresponsible black market with a legal market that can be regulated, removing the threat of prosecution from those already suffering disproportionately the burdens of life’s misfortunes.]

I congratulate the Multiple Sclerosis Society and the United Patients Alliance on the act of civil disobedience that was undertaken on Tuesday of this week, when a group of seriously ill patients protested against an unjust and unenforceable law. These are people who have already suffered more than their fair share of life’s misfortunes, and it is wrong that they should live under the threat of prosecution for taking their medicine of choice—the only medicine that will cure them of their symptoms.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his ten-minute rule Bill—I happened to be in the Chamber for its introduction—which seeks to address this very issue. In particular, in raising this issue he will, of course, have proper Government scrutiny over it. I wish him well in achieving his ambition.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): At Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, the Prime Minister had the opportunity to rule out the scrapping of the Royal Navy’s entire amphibious assault capability, but she chose not to. Will the Leader of the House recognise the very genuine cross-party concern made online, and there are facilities in jobcentres to help people to log in online. It is absolutely vital that all of us, as constituency MPs, make it clear to our constituents that they can ask for a call-back, which would be free to them.
about this latest round of Government defence cuts, and will she hold a debate in Government time to help inform the Ministry of Defence’s decisions?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will know that it is simply nonsense for him to talk about defence cuts. We are committed to spending 2% of GDP on defence, and that means there is increasing expenditure on all areas of defence. It is for the Ministry of Defence to look at the mix of different types of activity and the levels of expenditure that are appropriate to meet 21st-century needs.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a year to the day since I held a debate in Westminster Hall on the rape clause and the two child policy. May we please have debate on this vile policy, particularly as it has implications for women in Northern Ireland? They are being actively put in danger by this policy, because the third-party verifier is obliged by the law in Northern Ireland to report the rape to the police. There are significant implications for both women and third-party professionals, who could find themselves criminalised by this ill-thought-out and vile Government policy.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure the hon. Lady will find ways, as she has in the past, to raise this at various departmental questions.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a matter of great pride in this country that the British aerospace industry is the second largest in the world, employing many thousands of highly skilled people who are paid well above the national average wage. It was therefore with great dismay that we heard this week that 2,000 jobs are being cut at BAE Systems. I have personal experience of that, having worked in the shipbuilding industry when 2,000 jobs were cut at BAE Systems back in 2013. In both cases there was a common cause: a lack of long-term industrial planning for key sovereign industrial capabilities. The national shipbuilding strategy, published just recently, in fact gave up any pretension to our having a world-class shipbuilding industry through providing the capital investment in shipbuilding infrastructure necessary for the industry to be world class. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate in the House on the national shipbuilding strategy and an aerospace industrial strategy to enable us to scrutinise this properly and ensure that we maintain a world-class industrial infrastructure?

Andrea Leadsom: I must say that it is great to hear an Opposition Member speaking up for the amazing manufacturing sectors in the UK. He raises an important point about BAE Systems. He will be pleased to know that, just last month, my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary signed a statement of intent with Qatar, committing the country to the purchase of 24 Typhoons and six Hawks from BAE. It is incredibly important to have a long-term look at the potential for industrial growth in this country, which is why the Prime Minister has set out a new industrial strategy, and this Government are absolutely behind it.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Grace Arms is a well-known landmark on the drive into Ellesmere Port town centre, but its existence is under threat from property developers. Many people in the area are deeply concerned by the potential loss of this much-loved community facility, so may we have debate on what more the Government can do to support local pubs?

Andrea Leadsom: I know we all go to great lengths to support our local pubs—not just by our physical presence, but in this place as well. It is right that we should do so, because they really are at the heart of all our communities. It sounds to me as though the hon. Gentleman might want to consider applying for an Adjournment debate.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, recently spoke about the serious threat facing Spanish democracy. However, the real threat to democracy is the brutal and thuggish approach to the Catalan people as they took part in a peaceful democratic vote. In that, he is acting more like a dictator than a democratic leader. May we have a debate on the right of democratic self-determination to enable hon. Members to discuss the brutality of the Spanish state?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in being extremely disturbed by the violence against innocent citizens. However, he will appreciate that each case of self-determination needs to be addressed according to its specific circumstances, and the Spanish courts have ruled that the vote was not held within the Spanish legal and constitutional framework.
Retail Energy

12.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement to the House about the draft Energy Price Cap Bill, which we are publishing today.

Over the past 15 years, energy prices have risen by over 90% in real terms. Currently, most households in Great Britain are on tariffs that penalise rather than reward loyalty. In 2014, in response to widespread concern that competition in the retail energy markets was not serving customers’ best interests, the independent regulator Ofgem referred the market for investigation to the Competition and Markets Authority.

The CMA completed its investigation in 2016 and found that the retail energy market was not operating in a fully competitive way. It reported that customers of the big six pay an average of £1.4 billion a year more than they would in a truly competitive market. The CMA report said:

“Overall, our view is that the overarching feature of weak customer response gives suppliers a position of unilateral market power concerning their inactive customer base and that suppliers have the ability to exploit such a position through their pricing policies.”

Since the CMA findings, the big six energy suppliers have announced unjustified price increases in their poor value standard tariffs. Customers of the these firms have seen their energy bills increase by between 7% and 10% within the past 12 months, increases on prices the CMA had already concluded were too high.

The Government want the market to thrive, and we continue to promote competition as the best driver of value and service for customers. However, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said last week, the Government are prepared to act when markets are not working for all consumers. The energy market is a clear example of this, as Ofgem itself said yesterday.

The energy market is on the cusp of a major change, in which smart meters will be offered to every household and business by the end of 2020. When fully rolled out, smart meters will make it easier for consumers to reduce their energy consumption and to access competitive deals. In the meantime, however, the CMA panel recommended a number of measures to improve competition and a temporary tariff cap for those with prepayment meters until smart meters are rolled out. As the CMA said:

“our remedies will take time to implement before they start to address the features that we have identified and, in turn, reduce the detriment to domestic customers arising from them.”

The CMA was in two minds over how widely interim protection should be applied. The panel’s minority opinion was that the temporary price cap should be extended to a wider group of consumers. In its words:

“They must be supplemented by a wider price control designed to give household customers adequate and timely protection from very high current levels of overcharging.”

The Government agree with that view, which is why I wrote to Ofgem in June to ask them what action they intended to take to safeguard customers on the poorest value tariffs. In response, Ofgem undertook to consult consumer groups to provide measures to protect vulnerable consumers.

We welcome Ofgem’s commitment yesterday to protect a further 1 million families, meaning over 5 million families will be protected from expensive standard variable tariffs for the first time, and we welcome Ofgem’s statement that suppliers must step up their efforts to get more of their customers currently on default tariffs on to better value deals. However, this does not address the scale of the detriment suffered by all consumers on expensive default tariffs and it still leaves 13 million families paying more than they would in a competitive market. These consumers are often on lower incomes, are elderly and are renters. I am determined that we will be on the side of all consumers and ensure that the market can become more effective. Our goal is to ensure a fair deal. The market is currently not delivering this, which is why the energy companies and Ofgem need to act. It is precisely for this reason that we are publishing this draft Bill today.

I have invited the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee to scrutinise the draft Bill, which provides for a price cap for domestic customers on standard variable tariffs and default tariffs. The cap will be temporary and will be set by the independent energy regulator, Ofgem. It will initially last until the end of 2020, with the potential to be extended by up to three years if needed.

The draft Bill will preserve the ability for the market to act competitively; there should be savings for customers on high-priced standard variable tariffs, but enough headroom to allow for effective competition and to give a reason for people to shop around. It is of the utmost importance that consumers are treated fairly and our priority must always be to act in their interests. The draft Bill would allow competition and innovation in tariffs between existing players and new entrants, but would ensure that the worst excesses of overcharging could not be visited on loyal and, in many cases, vulnerable consumers of energy companies. It would require Ofgem to impose the cap as soon as is practicable after legislation, but it does not stop companies acting sooner and they should do so.

To conclude, Mr Speaker, when £1.4 billion a year of detriment to British consumers is identified, following a thorough investigation, we have a duty to act. These measures are intended to safeguard the interests of consumers during the transition to a more competitive market. I commend this statement to the House.

12.9 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Just two years ago, the then Prime Minister criticised Labour’s energy price cap policy, saying we wanted to live in a Marxist universe. Well, we certainly are in strange political times, that’s for sure. It has taken an extraordinary amount of time to get to this stage and enormous pressure from the shadow Front-Bench team and hon. Members on both sides of the House. It is impossible, however, for the price cap to protect families this coming winter. Ofgem has indicated it would take about five months after the Bill’s Royal Assent for the regulator to enact a price cap. Owing to the Government’s dithering, the 4 million households in fuel poverty, almost 1 million of which include a disabled person, will now face another winter of cold homes or astronomical bills.
Will the Secretary of State explain why it has taken so long? Labour has been consistently calling for action and clarity on the Government’s position since the election and for a price cap for several years, but even today several issues require further clarification.

First, will the Secretary of State confirm why the draft Bill, which I have just perused, does not provide any direction from him on his preferred cap parameters but instead passes the ball to Ofgem? Will it be a relative cap or an absolute cap? Will he direct Ofgem to implement a different cap if he is not content with the one it proposes following the review? Secondly, will he confirm how long he anticipates the Bill’s passage taking and whether he will take any ancillary measures to expedite the usual scrutiny process?

Thirdly, reports this morning stated that the cap would apply to 12 million households, but the Bill is not clear on the cap parameters, as I have said, and leaves much to the discretion of Ofgem. Will the Secretary of State confirm, then, why the Government have seemingly rowed back from the commitment to knock £100 off the bills of 17 million households? Surely this should be explicit in the Bill or ancillary directions to Ofgem.

Fourthly, the Secretary of State is no doubt aware that Labour would introduce an immediate emergency price cap to ensure that the average household bill is protected this winter, with a further 2 million to follow. Has the cap been in place since 2010, the average customer would have saved more than £1,000 on their bills by now. Does he anticipate, in all this ambiguity, that the final cap will go anywhere near Labour’s proposals? If not, by how much does he expect bills to be reduced, if at all?

Finally, we are discussing the need for an energy price cap in the first place only because our energy market is fundamentally broken—even the Prime Minister acknowledges that. Labour understands that the price cap is only a temporary fix and so would radically reform the market by, among other measures, creating a publicly owned, locally accountable energy supply company in every region and ensuring greater transparency and fairness in the pricing structures of the supply and wholesale energy market. Does the Secretary of State accept that a price cap, although welcome, is only a sticking plaster and that radical reform of the market is necessary?

If so, how and when does the Secretary of State propose to reform the energy market and will he direct Ofgem to do it, rather than simply calling for a review, as the draft Bill suggests? Or have we got to wait until 2020 and the outcome of such a review before we see any real action? I hope that we do see action before 2020 because the cap is only guaranteed for the next two winters. Homes and businesses up and down Britain face a bleak winter and—it seems—further ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the Government’s position on the price cap mechanism and the wider reforms our energy market desperately needs.

Greg Clark: If one thing would be disastrous for consumers, taxpayers and business confidence in this country, it would be the hon. Lady and her Front-Bench colleagues’ proposal for nationalised energy companies. It is not even clear how it would be paid for, but there are only three ways: taxing more, borrowing more, or expropriating assets. If that is about achieving the confidence of British business, she has a long way to go.

The hon. Lady asked about the action being taken and the required pace. I remind her that in 13 years of Labour Government not a single protection was put in place for consumers. I think the Conservative-led Government who commissioned the Competition and Markets Authority report—something that the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), when he had the opportunity, signally failed to do—as a result of which 4 million consumers will benefit this winter from a cap on prepayment meter tariffs, which again is something the previous Labour Government failed to do in their 13 years in office.

Since taking on this role, I have been absolutely clear, on the basis of the CMA’s assessment, that we require nothing less than the eradication of that detriment of £1.4 billion, which is why, in response to my requirements, Ofgem has announced that a further 1 million will be protected this winter, with a further 2 million to follow. I have been clear, however, that that is not comprehensive enough, and it is because I am not satisfied that we are introducing the Bill. We published it and submitted it to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which I hope will give it urgent pre-legislative scrutiny so that we can reflect what I think is a broad consensus in the House that the objectives should be an energy market that works for all and, before that, protection for the consumers currently suffering the detriment identified. I hope that there will be a consensus around that so that we can proceed with the Bill.

As I said in my statement, however, it is open now to energy companies to move people off the standard variable tariffs identified as overcharging customers. Indeed, Ofgem has made it clear that it expects them to do so. They should do so now and not wait for the Bill.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on embracing the huge cross-party consensus on protecting 17 million households from rip-off energy bills. This is a good day. It is great that we can now move on to discuss how, rather than if, we can proceed with the Bill.

Greg Clark: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Friend on embracing the huge cross-party consensus on protecting 17 million households from rip-off energy bills. This is a good day. It is great that we can now move on to discuss how, rather than if, we can proceed with the Bill. In the spirit of consensus, will he listen to the widespread concerns that an absolute cap would throttle competition, be out of date as soon as the wholesale price of gas changed and mean energy companies spending more time lunching their regulator than delighting their customers, whereas a relative cap would preserve competition, make the customer king and provide far wider consumer choice?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of the statement and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for the cross-party way in which they have brought this to the House. I am sure that that is what has forced Government action.
With 18 million customers on default tariffs, today’s announcement is a welcome step forward. I hope that those customers get the benefit of the savings that have been talked about. We need to make sure, however, that there is not too much equalisation or coalescing of pricing around the cap and that customer service is not affected as a consequence of companies trying to find other ways to save money. As the Secretary of State rightly said, standard variable tariffs themselves are a problem. How will the Government guarantee that people are moved off them once and for all?

The end supplier is only a small component of energy bills. What steps will the Government take to review the profits that the distant network operators make? They make up a huge cost in energy bills. Government energy policy also impacts on energy bills. I refer the Secretary of State to the Hinkley project and the fact that future auctions have been announced but onshore wind cannot bid. To keep energy prices down, clearly we must have the most cost-effective energy generation policies in place, so it must be allowed to bid in the electricity generation market. In Scotland, the First Minister has announced that a public sector supplier will be set up and allowed to bid in the markets. Does the Secretary of State welcome that and is it something that the UK Government will follow? Energy efficiency is also a key component. The Scottish Government are committed to a warm homes Bill. Will the UK Government do likewise?

Greg Clark: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to stay for the statement by my hon. Friend the Minister for Climate Change and Industry.

Alan Brown indicated assent.

Greg Clark: He says that he will. I hope he will give a warm welcome to the proposals in the clean growth strategy, which will include something that many of his colleagues in Scotland, from all parties, have pressed for, which is the remote islands being entitled to bid in renewables auctions. I hope he will welcome that and, indeed, our leadership in renewables, not only in deployment—we are the world’s leader in offshore wind—but in the jobs being created around the United Kingdom in the supply chain.

When it comes to the proposals in the retail market that we have set out, I can confirm that it is absolutely the Government’s intention and requirement that competition should be preserved—indeed, extended—in this market. The Competition and Markets Authority said there was not enough of it at the moment. That is why part of its panel said that interim measures were needed while that competition comes in. That is important, and the requirement of the draft Bill is that Ofgem should take steps to ensure choice and vigorous competition as part of that.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome the changes that my right hon. Friend has made today. I have mentioned this to him before, but can he look seriously at the issue of energy companies charging people a lot more money for their domestic energy bills if they do not pay by direct debit and instead pay by cheque or through their bank or post office? It seems outrageous that these customers have to pay a lot more when they are doing the right thing and paying on time, but not by direct debit.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is always a doughty champion of consumers. It is right in a competitive market that decisions should be taken by the companies, but it is clear from the proposals that we have made that we expect responsibility to be exercised and that unfair advantage should not be taken, especially not of vulnerable consumers who are not as able to switch, for example—this may apply to payment methods, in the way that he described. That is absolutely part of the duty of the regulator to look after consumers.

Perhaps I could take this opportunity to reply to the point, which I did not respond to, that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) raised about the other costs on consumer bills. We have commissioned a review by the energy expert Professor Dieter Helm that will be inquiring into just such things and reporting shortly.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Given that this policy was once described from the Dispatch Box as “a con”, “a joke”, “disastrous” and “living in a Marxist universe”, it would be churlish not to welcome the Secretary of State’s conversion to it today. Well done. He is very welcome to the party. However, I still think his voyage into the Marxist universe is a bit slow, if I can put it that way, because this is a draft Bill. It is four months since the general election. He said that there would be help this winter. He could have chosen to fast-track this measure with the Opposition Front Bench and get the help in now. Why so slow? Why not do it now?

Greg Clark: I certainly have not joined the Marxist universe that the right hon. Gentleman inaugurated and that has been taken up with such enthusiasm by those on the current Labour Front Bench. The problem with the proposal that he put forward—one of many problems—was that it would have frozen energy prices when prices in the wholesale market fell, so consumers would have been paying more. That is a good reason why we should act with the grain of the market rather than imposing a policy that would have been disastrous for consumers.

It is important that Ofgem has the powers and it is exercising some of them. I have been clear and candid with the House that I do not think it goes far enough, so through this Bill we would require that. We are putting forward with immediate effect for pre-legislative scrutiny. It is important that we establish that it has the support of the House and then Ofgem can act on that, but it has been clear in its statement that, as the Bill is scrutinised, it will prepare and consult on the implementation requirements so that no time is lost.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I welcome the statement. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me and many of my constituents in Stirling, who are currently paying too much for their energy bills, that a fully functioning competitive market is the best long-term driver for value for customers? Will he also say when smart meters will become universal? By that I mean not supplier-specific, which I consider to be anti-competitive.
**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is absolutely right that a fully competitive market is what we want and what we will achieve. The essence of the problem for people on standard variable tariffs is that the energy companies have more information about the habits and behaviour of consumers than is available to their competitors. They therefore know which consumers will never respond, no matter how swinging a price increase is, but other competitors do not have access to that information to address the imbalance. That is why smart meters are being rolled out. They are moving forward from the first generation, so that they are fully rich in the information available, and that is part of the roll-out that is taking place now.

**Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD):** Did the Secretary of State receive any of the advice that I did in his position that an energy price cap such as that which he is proposing could mean higher bills for the most vulnerable consumers, as seven of the eight members of the Competition and Markets Authority also feared? Will he confirm that without a cap we have seen a dramatic expansion of competition, switching numbers soaring and a sustained reduction in the number of consumers on variable tariffs? Is not the real reason he has gone for this temporary and timid price cap that he does not really believe in it?

**Greg Clark:** No. I have been determined from the outset to eradicate the abuse that the CMA has identified. It seems to me that if £1.4 billion of abuse has been identified, it is essential that that is eradicated. This problem is specific to modern markets—without the smart meters that will provide some relief from that—which is why it is important to provide interim measures, as the minority report of the CMA said. It is right to act on that. Everyone agrees—no one thinks that the market is fully competitive. The CMA in its majority report identified that the market was not functioning in a fully competitive way, and Ofgem said as much yesterday. As far as switching goes, in the last year only 16% of consumers switched, so 84% of the population did not. Until competition is fully established, it seems to me that people in that category deserve the Government to be on their side to ensure that they cannot be ripped off.

**Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con):** I congratulate the Government on putting the consumer first. It is a shocking revelation that £1.4 billion is being overpaid by consumers on their bills, so I welcome the fact that the Government are taking this seriously. Many of those consumers are in Taunton Deane and many are the most loyal customers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way to deliver best value for those people is through a truly competitive market and that nationalisation would certainly not be the answer?

**Greg Clark:** I agree with my hon. Friend. Many consumers who are loyal to a supplier, often for many years, assume not that they will get the best deal, but that a trusted brand will respect their loyalty and not abuse it. However, as the CMA has pointed out, that is not the case, and I think it is important that the issue is addressed before competition is fully established. As Ofgem said yesterday, highly priced, poor-value standard variable tariffs have had their day, and the energy companies should act to move customers away from them.

**Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab):** Much of what I am hearing is music to my ears, and I welcome the fantastic cross-party support. The draft Bill, however, is a vindication of Labour’s warnings since the data became available in 2011 that customers were being ripped off by the big six energy companies.

The Secretary of State has finally accepted that customers were overcharged by £1.4 billion between 2012 and 2015, but will he admit that what he is proposing today will not help the many millions of customers who will need help this winter? Why does he not stop wasting time? Why does he not use the extensive powers that the Labour Government gave him in the Energy Act 2010, under which he could bring an order to the House to cap prices right now? The dithering must stop. We have had the debate. Price caps already exist for those with prepayment meters and those receiving the warm home discount, and the Secretary of State should do this for everyone else now.

**Greg Clark:** I welcome the support from the cross-party group of which the right hon. Lady has been part, along with my hon. Friends. However, while she talks about the data being available, she seems to have forgotten that her party was in government for 13 years. It was this Government who exposed the degree of overcharging and it is this Government who are acting on it, so it is this Government who are standing up for consumers.

The right hon. Lady asked about relief this winter. As I have said, I welcome the extra relief, although I think that Ofgem should go further. It has said that it expects energy companies to move customers off the standard variable tariffs, but we are acting to ensure that that is backed up by an instruction and a requirement.

The use of the legislation mentioned by the right hon. Lady—I have of course examined it and taken advice—would have the consequence of increasing other prices, rather than capping the overall price, which is why the backstop power in the draft Bill is necessary.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) rose—**

**Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) rose—**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Battle of the New Forests! I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** I want to escape this Marxist universe. We cap university fees and, lo and behold, all the universities charge the maximum. Can the Secretary of State persuade me that electricity will be any different?

**Greg Clark:** As my right hon. Friend will know, there is a vigorous competitive market for deals that are available through a great many new entrants, and we want to expand that market. The CMA has established that at present there is insufficient competition in the standard variable tariffs. Our aim is to expand the competitive part of the market and in the meantime provide some protection for those who are paying too much on those tariffs.

**Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab):** I welcome the Government’s intervention on the road to Marxism. I think that—apart from one—we are all Marxists now. I want to make a serious point, but I have been banging on about this for a long time, and I have been accused of lots of things, which is why I make that statement.
[Albert Owen]

Speaking as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I think it is realistic to assume that the pre-legislative scrutiny will take some time. When does the Secretary of State expect the Bill to receive Royal Assent? Will that happen at the earliest opportunity, so that we can help the vulnerable people who are being ripped off? On the issue of competition, the Secretary of State mentioned a review. The energy companies said recently that the price hikes were due to transmission costs. Can we look into the uncompetitive nature of this broken energy market?

Greg Clark: As I said earlier, that is being considered as a separate exercise.

The hon. Gentleman referred to pre-legislative scrutiny by the Select Committee. I think that that is necessary so that we can establish a consensus and allow the technical scrutiny that is needed, so that once the Bill has passed that scrutiny and been introduced to the House, it can proceed with the strongest possible consensus.

Dr Julian Lewis: Given the time that will elapse before the cap is introduced, is there a danger that the energy companies will raise prices as much as possible in the hope of influencing the level at which the cap will be set? What will the Government do to prevent such a tactic from succeeding?

Greg Clark: Ofgem has powers, and that is one of the reasons why it is responsible for setting the cap. The prices must reflect the actual costs, and extensive powers are available to Ofgem to prevent that kind of abuse.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Bill will shave £100 from the energy bills of 17 million households, as promised by the Prime Minister?

Greg Clark: Yes. The detriment identified by the CMA was that people on standard variable tariffs were paying too much. It will be for Ofgem to determine what the level should be, but I have made it clear that I expect the whole of that detriment to be removed.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): There are still some people who believe in free markets. It is a lonely life, but I try to bear it with good grace.

I am naturally suspicious of caps, especially when they are introduced by a Conservative Government. Following the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), can the Secretary of State reassure me that the energy companies will not simply bunch up all the prices around the cap and that what little competition—imperfect competition—we see in the energy market today will not be further eroded so that more customers are put off from switching in the complacent, mistaken belief that they will get the best price, thanks to Government intervention?

Greg Clark: It is possible—and it is the practice—that companies, large and small, on the basis of their purchases in the wholesale market, can make offers to consumers in the competitive side of the market. Nothing will change that. Companies can offer attractive deals and have the same prospects—in fact, growing prospects, as we roll out smart meters—of access to customers who are engaged with the market.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): The Secretary of State has placed some emphasis on the roll-out of smart meters by 2020. How does he react to the figures published in The Daily Telegraph over the summer revealing that in the case of some companies, fewer than one in five consumers were accepting the offer of a smart meter?

Greg Clark: I do not recognise that figure. It is a fact that smart meters are being offered to every household in the country, and I think it is important that as they are rolled out, their benefits—not least the ability to secure lower prices—are made very clear to people.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and the recognition that there are issues with the energy market, but consumer apathy is the real problem. Does he agree that more needs to be done to encourage people to switch, and to make switching easier?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes a good point. One of Ofgem’s responsibilities is to stop the erection of barriers to switching. It seems to me, however, that it is not unreasonable for consumers to expect to be able to trust a particular brand—a particular supplier—rather than having to change their arrangements frequently, and to be confident that they will not suffer a huge penalty as a result.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am not a Marxist, but everyone in the Chamber must see that this is common sense.

When the energy price cap comes into effect, what safeguards will be introduced to ensure that the big six do not switch customers to a tariff that is, in effect, a standard variable tariff under a different name?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and he will see when he looks at the Bill that there is precisely a requirement that these abusive standard variable tariffs cannot be replaced by something with just a different name.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I know that the people of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine—possibly, dare I say it, even more than those of Taunton Deane—will welcome my right hon. Friend’s commitment today to a thriving and competitive energy market, so will he confirm that nationalising the energy companies has, unlike the Labour party’s position, never been a consideration for this Government?

Greg Clark: I very happily confirm that. Not only would that be a disastrous signal to business throughout the United Kingdom but, as has been evidenced during the election campaign, it would leave a gaping black hole in the public finances, and we have had no explanation whatever about how that would be paid for.
Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I hope that there is no state monopoly on Marxist metaphors. If I may paraphrase Trotsky, the ends we agree on; it is the means of getting there. In welcoming the draft Bill and urging consideration of a relative cap, will my right hon. Friend reaffirm that competition within the energy market remains crucial for consumer choice and keeping bills down?

Greg Clark: I will indeed, and that is why the proposal, in line with the recommendation of the minority report of the Competition and Markets Authority, is a temporary price cap during the period in which competition is extended. We agree very strongly that the best way for markets to serve consumers, bring down costs and promote innovation is to have vigorous competition, and that is at the heart of the obligation and the duty on the regulator.

Clean Growth Strategy

12.41 pm

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): I should like to make a statement on “The Clean Growth Strategy”, which we are publishing today. It contains 50 policies and proposals, of which 30 are brand-new announcements today. As the Prime Minister said in her foreword to the strategy:

“Clean growth is not an option, but a duty we owe to the next generation.”

My Department is dedicated to creating an economy that works for everyone through our modern industrial strategy. That means putting more money into research, development and innovation, investing in skills throughout the country and working with businesses to encourage growth in the areas where the UK has an advantage. It also means identifying and capturing the economic and industrial opportunities of the future. With the signing of the Paris climate agreement—an agreement in which UK leadership played a pivotal role—there is an unstoppable global shift toward clean technologies, infrastructure, industry and jobs. This offers UK businesses and innovators a huge opportunity to shape the future of clean growth and to capture the benefits, so we can have hundreds of thousands more good jobs right across the country.

We have already shown that action on climate change and economic growth go hand in hand. Since 1990, we in the United Kingdom have grown our economy by almost 70%, and in that time we have reduced our emissions by over 40%, which is the best performance in the G7. The latest research shows that the UK was the fastest of any country in the G20 to decarbonise in 2016. This achievement shows that a low-carbon transition can go hand in hand with economic growth, and it is our belief that the UK can lead the world in creating clean technologies, jobs and businesses. This is the core message of the clean growth strategy. It will sit at the heart of our industrial strategy and will build on the successes I have already mentioned to benefit businesses, consumers, the air we breathe, our health and the climate.

For example, it will help British businesses improve how they use their energy, by aiming to increase their energy productivity by at least 20% by 2030, worth at least £6 billion for our British businesses. As announced today, we will establish an industrial energy efficiency scheme to help large companies cut their bills, and we have also announced today a new commitment to demonstrate international leadership in carbon capture, usage and storage, including with new investment in leading-edge innovation to drive down costs. Significantly, there are only five carbon capture and storage plants operating globally that are not reliant on using the CO₂ for enhanced oil recovery. The technology can be better and the costs can be lower, and we intend to lead that challenge.

The plan announced today will also make our homes warmer and cheaper to run, as we invest about £3.6 billion to upgrade around 1 million homes through the energy company obligation and, as I announced today, extend that support out to 2028. Also today, we are setting a new ambition that every home in the country will reach an EPC—energy performance certificate—band C by 2035, where practical, cost-effective and affordable.
On our roads, our strategy will help reduce air pollution by increasing the number of electric vehicles and creating the best charging infrastructure in Europe. As announced a few weeks ago—the gun was jumped—we have also now set a plan to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars in this country by 2040.

But just having the Government making these changes is not enough on its own. We must ensure that British businesses, innovators and entrepreneurs capture the economic opportunities of this transition, both at home and abroad. There are already 430,000 jobs in low-carbon businesses and their supply chains right across the UK. The most recent research shows that the UK’s low-carbon economy is growing rapidly, by between 10% and 12% a year from now until 2030, four times faster than growth in the broader economy as a whole. By that estimate, in just 13 years, we could see up to 2 million more UK jobs in this sector and increase our exports by up to £170 billion each year. We need to capture that opportunity. That is why this Government are making such a significant increase in spending on research, development and innovation—the biggest increase in 40 years—and today, for the first time, in the clean growth strategy I have shown how we are spending £2.6 billion of that innovation in supporting the transition to a low-carbon economy.

For example, through the Faraday challenge, we are investing nearly £250 million in battery technology, to guarantee that the UK leads the world in the design, development and manufacture of batteries for both electric vehicle development and distributed energy storage. The strategy announced today builds on that with new financial support for innovations in heating, energy efficiency, industrial fuels, and carbon capture and storage. I strongly believe that these are the right decisions to make and now is the right time to make them.

The success I am talking about today is built on many years of work, strongly supported by colleagues right across the House. I particularly want to highlight the contributions of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who is no longer in his place, and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), and thank them for their efforts, both in government and opposition, which were pivotal in getting us to where we are today. I also thank the many other Members across both Houses who have doubled down and faced this challenge.

I also pay tribute to the former Prime Minister and former right hon. Member for Witney, who sustained her efforts in this direction and clear commitment to the idea that carbon capture and storage is a good thing. By putting the measures in our clean growth strategy into action, we not only continue our work in cutting emissions, but we can also cut consumer bills, drive economic growth, create high-value jobs right across the UK and improve our quality of life. It is a win-win opportunity: it is ours for the taking, and I commend this statement to the House.

12.48 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I welcome the final publication—after, we have to agree, many delays—of “The Clean Growth Strategy”, and I agree with the Minister that the UK has been, as it should be, towards the front of the pack in action to decarbonise our economy. I also agree that the responsibility for getting us to that position lies with the Members to whom she has paid tribute today. I also welcome the Minister’s clear position that she is fundamentally onside on the need to radically decarbonise our country to meet climate change imperatives—unlike, I have to say, many of her Back-Bench colleagues. I warmly welcome her efforts in this direction and clear commitment to the tasks we have to undertake.

I also welcome many of the additional policy directions that are contained in the document. I particularly welcome the commitment to further rounds of offshore wind to assist with the decarbonisation of the energy sector, and what I hope will be an intention to return to the development of onshore wind. These new policies and commitments, among many others, are important because it is clear that on present policies the UK is set to miss its key targets for decarbonisation, set out in the fourth and fifth carbon budgets, which this House has endorsed. That is surely the point of judgment for the efficacy of this plan: does it do what it is required by the terms of the Climate Change Act 2008?

“The Secretary of State must prepare such proposals and policies”

as “will enable the carbon budgets that have been set…to be met”? On that measure, it is clear from the report that the Government have failed in that task.

Even with the additional measures set out in this plan, as the report states on page 41, it is estimated that the UK will over-emit at the conclusion of the fourth carbon budget by 6% above that budget and at the conclusion of the fifth carbon budget by 9.7%. What additional proposals does the Minister have in mind to rectify that deficit—or does she consider that somehow we will get there without anything other than what is in this plan?

On getting there, does the Minister recognise just how far behind in decarbonisation we are in the heat sector? Does she consider that the funding set out for the renewable heat incentive up to 2021, which appears to be a restatement of what is already there, and of the energy company obligation, which appears to be a time extension of present funding for energy efficiency, will get us anywhere near the indicative heat decarbonisation and energy efficiency carbon reductions set out by the Committee on Climate Change in the fifth carbon budget?

The Minister will recall what emphasis the Committee on Climate Change placed on the role of carbon capture and storage. She mentioned in her statement that the Government now appear to be waking up once again to the idea that carbon capture and storage is a good thing.
While I welcome that apparent renewed interest in actually doing something about the establishment of CCS, both for energy generation and energy-intensive industries, does she consider that taking away £1 billion of funding for the development of CCS, as the Government did in 2016, and replacing it with up to £100 million of development funding in this plan will get us anywhere near the level of CCS use that the Committee on Climate Change recommends?

The Minister will be aware of how very important the traded sector is in the UK in terms of carbon emission reductions. The traded sector is kept on track by the EU emissions trading scheme. In her report, the long-term importance of the EU ETS is underlined, yet we currently have no certainty that the UK will remain within the EU ETS on Brexit, or that there will be any commitment, if not, that a substantive and internationally connected UK trading scheme will be established that can continue to keep the traded sector on target. Does she agree about the importance of the EU ETS in this sector?

Can she commit today to work towards continued UK membership of the EU ETS in the future?

I agree with the Minister that a low-carbon transition can go hand-in-hand with economic growth, and she has today and on other occasions emphasised that the use of industrial strategy to drive decarbonisation, while providing for jobs, supply chains and manufacturing in the process, is a very important fundamental platform for our decarbonisation approach generally.

Labour has committed itself to attain the key mission of industrial strategy that 60% of all energy—all energy, including electricity and heat—would arise from renewable and low-carbon sources by 2030, the middle of the fifth carbon budget. That would in itself ensure that the targets of the fifth carbon budget were met. Will the Minister of industrial strategy that 60% of all energy, for our decarbonisation approach generally.

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I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman, however, and I have helpfully set out on page 41 the fact that, should we have to, and with the consent of the Committee on Climate Change, we can use flexibilities. My intention is that we do not have to use them. Because we have over-delivered, and will over-deliver so substantially on current projections, up to carbon budget 3, more than enough will have been built up in terms of flexibilities to cover carbon budget 4 with more left over. My sense is that, given the ambition, the pace of change and the extraordinary changes in the cost and adaptation of new technology, we will comfortably exceed these budgets.

I admire the hon. Gentleman’s shadow ambition for renewable energy, but I want to be clear today that when we look at new technologies, it is important that we apply the triple test. First, the technology must decarbonise sufficiently; secondly, it must be affordable—we have to see a very good cost trajectory; and thirdly, it must build capabilities that Britain can build on, so that we can export and grow our own economy.

I would be delighted to sit down over a cup of coffee and review the hon. Gentleman’s plans for renewables and see whether they meet those tests. I think those are very appropriate tests, through which all technologies should be reviewed as we go forward.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) produced a series of essays for the Conservative Environment Network recently. I do not know whether the Minister got a chance to read one on the circular economy by—by me, actually. [Laughter.] If she does read it, she will realise why I am so happy today to see that hardwired across the Government is an understanding that resource efficiency is not just something that we require of businesses, congratulating them when they achieve it, but that we must lead, and lead not only in this country but globally. I pay great tribute to what she has produced, but we should ask ourselves, “What more can we do as a Government to encourage business and Government to manage our resources more efficiently?”

Claire Perry: Of course I always assiduously read anything written by my right hon. Friend and neighbour. Like him, I welcome the fact that as part of our 50-point policy and plans we have No. 41, which is to develop a world-leading resources and waste strategy, on which I am working closely with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) is absolutely right: it is right for the planet and it is right for business that we do this, so we will progress on that.
I have read the excellent document produced by the Conservative Environment Network, and I want to remind the House that the first person who raised the issue of man's activities—men's and women's activities—on the impact of the climate was, of course, Mrs Thatcher, who understood the core Conservative principle that you take care of what you inherit and try to pass it on to the next generation in a better form. I am proud to be the latest person to carry that flag for Conservative environmentalism in this House.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is interesting to hear that Maggie Thatcher's policy of shutting down coal mines and importing coal was down to some strategic vision about climate change. On a serious note, however, I thank the Minister for early sight of the statement and welcome the document's publication, although she will understand that I have not yet had a chance to read it from cover to cover.

The clean growth plan clearly needs to be strategic and must bind other Departments. As the shadow Minister said, it must tie in and deliver the desired outcomes of the carbon budget and our climate change commitments. That is the spirit and intention of the strategy, but the Government need to ensure that that actually happens, so Treasury commitments are necessary. Some £2.5 billion of investment was outlined in the statement, but that is in reality only a fraction of the investment that is needed to decarbonise the UK.

All future energy scenarios rely on carbon capture and storage, but the strategy both includes and dismisses the use of CCS, so I am not exactly sure about the Government's policy. We need a real commitment to delivering CCS, and the shadow Minister correctly said that pulling the £1 billion funding was farcical. Although the document states that £130 million has been spent on CCS R and D to date, that money has effectively been wasted. That was highlighted by a National Audit Office report, which said that the previous investment did not deliver any real outcomes. Investors need to have confidence in CCS, so the Government need to take a lead. The same can be said of tidal lagoons. If lagoons are to deliver, we need a much better show of commitment from the UK Government and we need it soon.

Another strategic aspect that the growth plan must link into is air quality. The strategy sets out the ambitions for ultra-low emission vehicles, but we need more than investment in charging points; we need real incentives to get people to purchase those vehicles, so a diesel scrappage scheme should be considered. The Government must also look at how they are going to tackle pollution from transport refrigeration units. A proper strategic review of infrastructure, transmission charges and energy efficiency is required, and it should consider in particular how to tackle private landlords. Onshore wind and solar are cheap, and such methods of electricity generation must be able to bid in the next round of contracts for difference. The Government need to keep an eye on this subject as the Brexit negotiations proceed and make changes as required.

Claire Perry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for an exhaustive and intelligent list of questions. I am happy to grab a cup of coffee with him and run through the document, because the strategy represents a genuinely UK-wide set of commitments. The Scottish and Welsh Governments have produced excellent plans using their devolved powers, which we welcome and in many cases support. As we implement the policies and design new ones, we are keen to work in a cross-Government and cross-party spirit of co-operation, because that is how we will get the best outcomes. I am happy to discuss all the opportunities with the hon. Gentleman and to listen to what he and his colleagues have to say. For example, I think we both welcome the remote islands announcement, which shows that we are absolutely committed to working within the current structure of various auctions and schemes to ensure that we maximise the contribution of low-carbon and low-cost energy from wherever we can source it.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I welcome this important strategy, but will my hon. Friend ensure that the resulting vital investment is directed at the most efficient and reliable sources of renewable energy, such as tidal power?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend will know that we try to be technologically neutral in the auction structure to ensure that sources of energy are the lowest cost and the most effective in terms of decarbonisation, creating a strategic base upon which we can innovate and invest. The excellent policy work has been striking, and I pay tribute to some of my predecessors in the Department. For example, our work on offshore wind, which involved setting a framework, investing up front and then driving down costs, has been amazing. Those are the sorts of processes that we would like all renewables to go through. My hon. Friend mentioned water power, and we have the second-highest tidal range in the world after the bay of Fundy—I know that only because I was a geography student—and exceptional amounts of power are being generated from our coastline.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Will the Minister tell us whether the newly privatised Green Investment Bank has fully signed up to the clean growth strategy? If so, how will its business plan be adapted or enlarged as a result?

Claire Perry: To reassure the right hon. Gentleman, not only has the Green Investment Bank—it is now known as the Green Investment Group—signed up to the plan, it has joined our green finance taskforce. We have asked our leading minds and operators in financial services, insurance, risk assessment and financial regulation to come together, so that we can not only mobilise the level of private capital that we need to drive this transformation in the UK, but export that incredible professional expertise right across the world. The taskforce is already coming up with solutions, and we will again be able to lead the world by mobilising capital and investing the right amount that we need to decarbonise.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on producing this brilliant strategy. It is brimming with ambition and full of good ideas, as we would expect from her. It is great stuff, but I just want to ask about one issue. The strategy tells us that transport emissions have been cut by 2% since 1990 compared with an average of well above 20% in all others sectors,
so if we are to hit the 2050 targets, we will need something really radical in transport. The strategy talks about banning the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2040, and I want my hon. Friend to reassure me that that will be equal to the challenge we face.

**Claire Perry**: My hon. Friend will of course know that per vehicle emissions have actually dropped. Cars are now about 20% more efficient, but we are using more of them. Reducing congestion and getting cleaner air is a really important benefit of taking action, but I hear what he is saying. The ambition is accelerating all the time. We announced ending the sale of conventional petrol and diesel cars and it is interesting that the Netherlands has come out with something similar. We are all doing this together. Things are the same with unabated coal. We said that we would phase it out by 2025 and Canada has said similar things. There is a genuine, exciting ambition, and things happen when we set such ambitions.

We have been talking about ending the sale of petrol and diesel cars for years, but we set the ambition and had that conversation and then many of the major manufacturers that are producing cars in the UK brought forward their plans for electric and ultra-low emission vehicles. For example, BMW announced that it will be building the electric Mini in the UK. This country already makes one in five of the electric vehicles sold in Europe, and it is through setting ambitions and then investing in innovations such as the Faraday challenge that we can be a world leader in making such vehicles and accelerating their transformation. However, this is not only about the vehicles; we also have to be able to charge them up. It is therefore important that we accelerate the roll-out of what we want to be the world’s most effective charging network, so that performance and price, not charging, are the only considerations when buying a car.

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): I was not myself, but the Minister told the Tory party conference that she viewed carbon capture and storage as a vital technology for the future, and I welcome its revival on the Government’s policy platform. They are certainly seeing sense. CCS is also vital for Teesside and for the jobs that the Minister talked about. Will she back the Teeside Collective project with real resources and, as she develops new initiatives, engage with the all-party parliamentary group on carbon capture and storage, which I chair?

**Claire Perry**: The hon. Gentleman is always welcome at the Conservative party conference. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), he does a great job of affirming the commitment and energy that is demonstrated by the Teesside Collective. As we say in the strategy, Teesside is one of several areas with rapidly advancing projects, and with our renewed commitment and desire to be world leaders in this area and in new investment I would like to see such ambitions taken forward.

**Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): Does the Minister, like me, welcome new investment in exploration for gas—a lower carbon option than coal—in the North sea and onshore, helping the UK achieve its carbon targets?

**Claire Perry**: As we set out clearly in the document, we think that gas, particularly its lowest carbon form, absolutely has an important role to play in our energy mix. That is why a renewed focus on and investment in CCUS is important.

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): I welcome today’s announcement about carbon capture and storage. Should I tell the regional dinner of the Yorkshire and Humber CBI, meeting in Leeds tonight, that there is fresh hope for the most ambitious carbon capture and storage project ever in this country—the White Rose pipeline project, which is backed by many in God’s own county?

**Claire Perry**: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take back a positive message about the opportunities for businesses in Yorkshire and the Humber from the clean growth strategy and urge those CBI members to bring forward their ideas, so that we can capture them, make the investments and create the thousands of good jobs that we need.

**James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): I warmly welcome the Government’s clean growth strategy—an excellent document with 30 new policies among the 50 policies and plans that have been announced. I pay particular tribute to the focus on energy efficiency. Will the Minister confirm that the 10-year extension of the energy company obligation will have a fantastic effect on the supply chains that do so much for home efficiency, and within commercial premises as well?

**Claire Perry**: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the fact that there are many new initiatives, particularly to do with the energy efficiency angle—especially business energy efficiency. Yes, there is the extension for ECO. Not only does that support a brilliant supply chain, but it helps the many people who struggle with fuel poverty. We are keen to use the money effectively to help upgrade more than 1 million homes and extend support for home energy efficiency until 2028 at the current level of ECO funding.

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): This long-awaited strategy sets out a good story, and I welcome the sentiment that it contains. In reality, however, it makes a mockery of clean growth and does not give any certainty for business. The ability to compete in global low-carbon markets and meet our needs from clean energy is the foundation of a prosperous low-carbon economy.

At the moment, the Government are failing to give a clear steer on emissions targets, have given no answers on the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon and are not investing in any meaningful way in renewable energy or energy efficiency. Will the Minister seek to introduce legally binding targets for renewable energy, as the Welsh Labour Government announced they would earlier this month? Successful markets need a clear strategic vision and leadership, and an effective regulatory regime. This Conservative Government have neither.

**Claire Perry**: It is a shame; I can only assume that the hon. Lady has not read the report. I genuinely think that for the first time we have the clearest set of cross-Government ambitions, policies, initiatives and funding— [Interruption.] The hon. Lady should have come to
the launch, where the chief executive of Siemens talked about how businesses such as his completely welcomed and supported the strategy and were investing in their supply chains on the back of it.

We have an effective, legally binding regime that operates right across the UK. It is called the Climate Change Act, introduced with cross-party support in 2008. We have to produce our carbon targets. I have set out today why I think we are on a good trajectory towards them. However, I fear that the hon. Lady wants to be one of those “command and control” Marxists who wants to predict every single thing that happens in the economy at all times. That is not how innovation works. We set out a framework for investment. We try not to pick technologies; we want the lowest carbon, the lowest cost and the most innovation. We then work with the private sector to create the most innovative ecosystems, so that we can capture the opportunities. I will be very happy to have a cup of coffee with the hon. Lady and give her a slight cheering up. There is a lot of good stuff in the report, and she should be supporting it.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I warmly welcome the clean growth strategy. How can we maintain the great momentum behind it across Departments?

Claire Perry: This is not an end point, but a stock take. Over the next few months, we will be bringing forward many of the detailed proposals that we need to deliver on these ambitions and policies. I would warmly welcome input from knowledgeable colleagues on both sides and the many stakeholders and campaigning organisations out there. We want to shape these policies for the future.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The greenest energy is fast becoming the cheapest energy. I thank the Minister for her kind words about my role and in that spirit take an approach unusual in this House: reserving my judgment on the strategy until I have actually read it.

I want to push the Minister on the importance of energy efficiency regulations. Will she confirm that the regulation on private landlords in respect of minimum energy efficiency standards is going ahead next April and will be fully enforced? Will she revisit and overturn the bad decision by the former Chancellor to scrap the zero-carbon homes standard on new build homes?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman and I are both really pleased at what has happened in the renewables sector. He is right to focus on energy efficiency because of course that drives down people’s bills—there is a huge win there. Yes, I can confirm that we are going forward with the legislation. He and I were both heavily involved in the design of the green deal, one of the facilitating mechanisms. Clearly, it did not work out as we would have liked.

We want to consider new ways of financing that transition, which is why we are asking our green finance taskforce to focus particularly on green mortgages and see whether we can bring forward other financing mechanisms. I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point about zero-carbon homes, but I want to make sure that our regulations are absolutely fit for purpose, both for new homes and any additional works done. He would agree that we cannot do that work unilaterally, without full reference to the Hackett review of the Grenfell fire safety issue. We intend to consider those regulations to see what more can be done, but it is right to sequence it in that matter.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my bills go up?

Claire Perry: The answer is no. Although we have all invested in some of these progressive energy investments, prices are clearly falling. Only a couple of weeks ago, I opened the first subsidy-free solar farm in the UK. As we have pushed towards this low-carbon future, my right hon. Friend’s bills have likely gone down. He will be using less energy in his home because of the LED light bulbs he has installed and all the new appliances he has bought, which are much more energy efficient.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): If we had succinct questions, we might get succinct answers. “No” would have been helpful.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The strategy rightly supports the continuing roll-out of district heating across the country. May I impress on the Minister the real risk that the environmental benefits of the technology will be overshadowed by systemic problems in the industry? There are scores of such schemes in my constituency and many more in the pipeline. In each and every case, constituents are convinced that they are not getting a fair deal on tariff pricing, standing charges, transparency on consumption and billing, and system performance. The situation cries out for effective statutory regulation. As the Minister takes the strategy forward, will she bear that issue in mind, so that we can win the confidence of consumers as the industry expands?

Claire Perry: Most certainly.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Coal-fired power generation ceased in Rugeley last year. That commercial decision on the part of the owners represented the end of an era. The Government are committed to phasing out coal-fired generation by 2025. One of the frustrations for my constituents is when they go to other countries and see coal-fired power generation. Will the Minister outline what success we have had in encouraging other countries to follow our example of committing to end such generation?

Claire Perry: To reassure my hon. Friend, I should say that, as I mentioned, Canada has agreed to end it, as has the Netherlands. China has agreed to reduce its carbon emissions by 60% to 2032 and India has said that it wants to lead the world in solar generation. All countries—with the exception, perhaps, of one big one—have woken up to the fact that the world is moving away from coal. In doing so, they are creating prosperity and jobs.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I have spent the morning reading the clean growth strategy. On first reading, it appears mainly to be a repackaging of old announcements, with only small packets of new funding and increased existing funding being spent over
longer periods. I am glad that the Minister touched on electric vehicles. The gap with respect to the old plans that we already have is 12 megatonnes of CO₂. Today’s announcement does not bridge that gap, as can be seen in the chart on page 85 of the strategy. The gap remains. The funding for electric charge points is woefully inadequate, and I call on the Minister to look again at supporting large-scale electric vehicle charging funding, working closely with local authorities to ensure that EV charging points are in commercial and residential areas, not just on major roads. I ask her to commit to a minimum level of public EV charge points per head of population or per electric vehicle. I am glad she mentioned the Netherlands, because it has one public EV charge point—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Members are meant to ask a succinct question.

Alex Sobel: I will just get the question—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Just give it now or else you will be sitting down.

Alex Sobel: The Netherlands has a charge point for every two to seven vehicles, whereas the figure in the UK is much higher. Are we going to have the same—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think the Minister has got the gist.

Claire Perry: I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. He will be pleased to hear that in the automated and electric vehicles Bill, we will be bringing forward new powers to make sure that all these things he has talked about in terms of statutory powers are at our disposal, because we want to have the world’s best rapid charging network.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Unlike some Opposition Members, I wholeheartedly welcome this strategy, with its commitment to the low-carbon transformation. It will have enormous spin-offs not only for the environment but for business, as was so eloquently outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). Home energy efficiency is a key part of our drive towards our targets, so will the Minister update us on what is being done to encourage house builders to play their part in this eventual drive towards zero-carbon homes?

Claire Perry: As I have mentioned, we need to look closely at new building regulations and sequence those appropriately. My hon. Friend will see that we are keen to ensure that we phase out having houses off the gas grid, as many in my constituency are, where they currently rely on what can be high-cost fossil fuels; we will start with new homes. That is a process of working with the industry, as getting people to think about energy efficiency happens not just because someone is sitting at home, but often because a builder, architect or plumber recommends it. We therefore need to work much more closely with industry to deliver on these targets.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): My constituency already has onshore wind, solar generation and new battery storage technologies, but we have to seize the opportunities of tidal power, district heating from my local industrial estate of Avonmouth and the power of co-operatively owned generation, storage and distribution. Does the Minister agree that the investment that Governments make to create new markets is an important part of this policy approach? Will she confirm that her second test of affordability will not prevent this important public policy position from growing new markets and new technologies?

Claire Perry: I commend the hon. Gentleman for the efforts of his constituents and local businesses, and answer him by saying yes, absolutely; we are looking at a further meeting with him to understand how this is done, because the problems that his constituents have solved are stopping many other communities taking these important steps. Perhaps we could set up a meeting.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I welcome this important statement. May I applaud the Minister’s enthusiasm in presenting the strategy? I welcome the affirmation that action on climate and economic growth can go hand in hand, and that it is our plan to make the UK the world leader in creating clean technology jobs and businesses. Will she say whether the Treasury are considering changes to stamp duty to help energy-efficiency improvements?

Claire Perry: It is not energy but caffeine that is doing this. My hon. Friend asks an important question, and I welcome the opportunity to clear this up. We see many suggestions and all sorts of ideas about how we meet our carbon budgets, but tax matters such as stamp duty are ones for our excellent Chancellor and his Budgets. It would be a brave Minister who tried to make those points at the Dispatch Box.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I echo what colleagues from across the House have said about this being an excellent announcement, and I congratulate the Minister on everything she has done to bring it about today. I echo what the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said about how this will be particularly warmly welcomed on Teesside. May I invite the Minister to agree with me that Teesside is the natural starting point for CCS in the UK, owing to its concentrated and diverse industry, proximity to north-east storage sites and optionality for future low-carbon technologies, such as hydrogen?

Claire Perry: I hope there are many pints lined up in the bars in Teesside for both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), because Teesside makes a powerful case for exactly this sort of investment. We look forward to reviewing that, along with the other proposals that we have.
Official Report

Minister's questions, the Leader of the Opposition stated:

"Gloucester City Homes has evicted one in eight of all of its tenants because of universal credit."—[Official Report, 11 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 324.]

That would imply that of its total of 5,200 tenants some 650 people in my constituency had been evicted because of universal credit. The actual figures, as Gloucester City Homes has confirmed, are that a total of eight tenants on universal credit have been evicted, and all eight had significant debt arrears before universal credit was introduced. This is not to deny that Gloucester City Homes has had issues with the introduction of universal credit—it has agreed a 13-point plan, which includes working more closely with Department for Work and Pensions staff for the benefit of tenants, not least in seeing a greater take-up of advance payments—but the key point is that the picture painted by the Leader of the Opposition yesterday was a very long way from the true situation. I have given him a copy of this point of order, and I hope he will agree that this clarifies the situation, both about Gloucester City Homes, a highly respected housing association, with which I work closely, and about the impact of universal credit.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): As the hon. Gentleman is aware, that is not really a matter for the Chair. It is the responsibility of each Member to make things accurate when they make mistakes. Members do inadvertently make mistakes, but that has been corrected and it is certainly now on the record.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek clarification on an issue of parliamentary protocol. On Monday, the Speaker felt the need to admonish me as I left the Chamber while the leader of the Scottish National party in this place was on his feet responding to the Prime Minister's statement. As I understand it, Members are allowed to leave the Chamber as long as they do not break the line of sight between the Speaker’s Chair and the Member who is on their feet. As I left along the line of the Government Benches, it is difficult to see how I could have broken that rule. Therefore, I seek clarification on this, for my benefit and that of other Members who might wish to leave a crowded Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was not in the Chair at the time and I have no idea what happened, but I am sure Mr Speaker would not get things wrong. If there was a mistake, it would have been a genuine mistake, as all these things are in the Chamber.

Leaving the EU: Data Protection

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Exiting the European Union and Data Protection.

The digital revolution through which we are living is bringing about the fastest pace of change that any generation has ever seen. With advances in technology accelerating, it is likely that this current pace of change will be the slowest that any of us will experience probably for the rest of our lives. This vast change brings with it big opportunities. We have opportunities to communicate, innovate and organise in ways that were simply inconceivable just a few short decades ago. It also brings with it challenges: to harness the technology for good; to mitigate harm; and to make sure that everyone can benefit.

Underpinning this revolution is the fact that the cost of storing and transmitting data has collapsed faster than at any time since the invention of the printing press, and perhaps at any point in history. The new technology then cut the cost of storing information from the cost of a handwritten manuscript to the cost of print, and the revolution now has cut the cost from that of print to the almost infinitesimally small cost of data storage. Data is therefore the fuel of this new digital economy, and getting the rules on data right is mission-critical for strength in the future.

As well as being fuel for change, data is a massive stimulant for our economic growth, jobs creation and innovation. The UK has Europe's largest and most dynamic digital economy, attracting approximately £28 billion in technology investment since 2011. The UK also has the largest internet economy of all G20 countries, emphasising the fact that data is rapidly transforming our lives, and creating exciting and innovative opportunities right across the world. The impact is, of course, much broader than just in the tech industry itself. Data underpins social interactions; a Skype call to a family member on the other side of the world, or almost every other part of economic activity, and almost all trade. The importance of the digital economy as a catalyst for job creation and innovation continues to increase exponentially, so it is vital that data is kept secure. Our approach to data protection as we leave the EU is straightforward: we wish to ensure the unhindered free flow of data between countries, if that data is held securely and privacy is respected.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I very much agree with the points that the Minister is making and the ambition he is setting out. Will he commit to securing an adequacy agreement from the EU, so that the free flow of personal data, which he rightly says is important, can continue?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's extensive understanding of these issues, not only from his time as a Minister but since. His understanding is so good that he has correctly anticipated the next page of my speech. That is exactly what we are seeking, because it is strongly in the mutual interests of the UK and the rest of the EU that such an arrangement is put in place.
Having just set out my punchline, perhaps I can describe the build-up to it. The goal is for data to be unhindered when security and privacy are respected. It must be unhindered, so that trade and communication can be effective and so that we can innovate in the use of information, including through advanced techniques such as machine learning and artificial intelligence. But data can be unhindered only where it is appropriate for it to go—with data held securely and privacy respected—which means where there are high standards of cybersecurity and data protection.

On cyber-security, the 2017 British Chambers of Commerce digital economy survey reveals that at least one in five UK firms were subject to a cyber-attack in 2016, with larger firms more likely to be hit. As more and more citizens, and the wider economy, rely so heavily on digital technology, it is vital to keep data safe from cyber-attack. On the other side of the coin from strong cybersecurity is strong data protection. The UK has been a world leader in data protection for a long time, combining privacy with support for dynamic data-driven innovation. We are determined to ensure that, after our exit from the EU, the UK remains a global leader, promoting both the flow of data internationally and high standards of data protection.

For more than a generation, the Data Protection Act 1998 has been regarded as the gold standard in the world. That Act, which was based on European rules set out in 1995, was the result of a piece of work that started under the then Conservative Government, with the legislation enacted by the subsequent Labour Government. That demonstrates the cross-party approach that has been taken to data protection in the UK. Technology marches on, however. It is almost 20 years since the 1998 Act, but the legislation needs to be kept up to date in this changing world. The Data Protection Bill, which had its Second Reading in the other place earlier this week, will modernise data protection legislation, giving citizens more rights over their data while allowing businesses to use modern data management techniques. It offers greater transparency and accountability, thus giving people more reassurance about how their personal data is used by businesses and organisations. Increased accountability and public confidence in how data is used can enhance the digital economy for the benefit of all.

To return to the point made by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the Bill will prepare Britain for Brexit. It will extend the EU’s general data protection regulation—GDPR—and bring into UK law the law enforcement directive. It will extend the principles of GDPR into many areas of our domestic law, which will help to ensure that we prepare the UK for the future after we have left the EU. The implementation of the Bill will ensure that we preserve the concepts of the Data Protection Act that have served us so well. We will aim to ensure that the transition for businesses, individuals and charities is as smooth as possible, while complying with the GDPR and the law enforcement directive in full. That means we will be as well placed as possible to achieve the unhindered flow of data with the EU through something akin to the adequacy deal mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman. That is strongly in the interests of both sides in the negotiation.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Minister said “something akin” to an adequacy deal. Will he explain what that might mean?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Our future relationship with the EU will be bespoke. We want to make sure that the flow of data is unhindered, so we effectively seek an adequacy deal, but that is currently scheduled to be negotiated as part of the future relationship. Whether it is enacted through the formal EU mechanism of an adequacy deal or as part of the negotiation is, in a sense, immaterial. What matters is the unhindered free flow of data between the two regimes.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): No one would dispute the worthiness of the Minister’s intentions, but the UK will none the less cease to be a member of the EU’s safe data zone following Brexit, which will make it more difficult for banks and other businesses to transfer data between the two jurisdictions. Will the Minister give some reassurance to businesses that are having to make decisions between now and Christmas and into the first quarter of the new year that we will secure the transitional arrangements that businesses need and thereby give them certainty that they will be able to continue to operate as they do now, not only when a deal on our future relationship is signed, but in the crucial transitional period?

Matt Hancock: That is our objective, but I have one difference with the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question. He said that our leaving the EU will make things more difficult, but that is not necessarily so, because we seek a relationship that, in terms of the unhindered flow of data, is as high quality as the one we have now. We of course need to secure that as part of the negotiations, and we need to secure it as part of the transitional arrangements as well. Indeed, as we set out in a paper published in August, we are looking at an enhanced mechanism that is not just the normal adequacy deal that other third countries have, but one that enables continued technical engagement between the Information Commissioner and European bodies to ensure that our technical capabilities can continue to inform the future development of data protection standards inside the EU. I did not simply say that we seek an adequacy deal full stop, because we are looking into having a deal that not only reflects a normal third-country adequacy deal, but goes further and ensures that we have a stronger technical relationship between our regulator, the Information Commissioner and the European regulators.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The UK has more than 10% of data flows, more than three quarters of which are with the EU, and more than 40% of the data centres in Europe are in the UK, so does the Minister agree that it is in the interests of European businesses to secure data adequacy—or data adequacy within a new free trade agreement—as well as in the interests of British businesses?

Matt Hancock: I agree wholeheartedly and strongly with my hon. Friend, who is an expert in these matters, having just arrived in the House from the European Parliament, where she was a rapporteur on some of the key committees that made a number of the important decisions in this policy area. She is absolutely right. The unhindered flow of data will take place between two regimes that are harmonised, because we are bringing into UK law the GDPR, which is obviously European legislation. It is in the strong interests of the UK and the EU to ensure the unhindered free flow of data after Brexit.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the Minister for so generously giving way. I just wanted to press him on the point that he made about the engagement that will happen at a technical level. In practice, does that mean that our standards will be maintained in tandem with those in the EU, and that therefore there will be no difference between the two?

Matt Hancock: What it means is that the arrangements are harmonised right now. Should the Data Protection Bill become an Act, as I sincerely hope it will—it does have cross-party support—our existing arrangements at the point of exit will be harmonised. What happens after that will depend on the negotiation of our future relationship, with the UK being sovereign. The point is to ensure that the technical details are informed by high-quality UK technical considerations and the capability of the Information Commissioner’s Office. This is, of course, subject to negotiation. We set that out as something we wanted to consider when we published the paper in the summer, but, as the right hon. Gentleman may have heard, we are not yet on to negotiating our future relationship, although we are looking forward to that happening.

During the summer, we published the future partnership paper, which sets out how we ensure the continued protection and uninterrupted exchange of personal data between the EU and the UK. The purpose of setting that out was to offer stability and confidence to businesses, public authorities, charities and individuals. My message to business in particular is very clear. We understand how important this matter is. We know that it is in the strong self-interest of the UK and the EU to get a good deal that involves the unhindered free flow of data. The new partnership should protect the privacy of individuals and respect the UK’s sovereignty, including the UK’s ability to protect the security of its citizens and to maintain and develop its position as a leader in data protection. Ensuring that we protect privacy while also allowing for the innovative use of big data so that the UK can be a world leader in artificial intelligence are the joint goals of the Data Protection Bill.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): On the point about what the general data protection regulation provides as an opportunity, does the Minister recognise that it will actually be implemented through a statutory instrument under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill? Does he agree that we should therefore have a debate in the House on that SI when we get the opportunity?

Matt Hancock: I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), will have heard that point—this is a bit like a return to business questions from earlier. Parliamentary procedure is a matter for that Bill, but the hon. Gentleman has made his case. It is very important that the element of the GDPR that is directly applicable and therefore not in the Data Protection Bill is brought into UK law. However, we have designed the Bill so that that can slot directly in, meaning that once we leave, the UK should have a fully consistent, full-spectrum data protection regime under our legislation.

The new relationship should also not impose unnecessary additional costs on businesses and must be based on the objective consideration of evidence. Furthermore, because many of these issues are technical, we will continue to seek ongoing regulatory co-operation between the EU and the UK on current and future data protection issues. By doing that, we will build on the opportunity of a partnership between global leaders on data protection and continue to protect the privacy of individuals. As the paper that we published in the summer reiterates, it is important that we provide clarity and certainty for businesses and individuals as soon as possible, so that data flows are not disrupted when the UK leaves the EU. In addition, this is part of a wider global debate about the flow of data, because it is also incredibly important that we get right our data relationship with the United States, Japan and others.

Tom Brake: The Minister is being very generous with his time. I am sure that he is aware that the people of Gibraltar are concerned about the impact of the disruption of data flows. Gibraltar holds many data servers, and people there are very concerned that there might be longer-term impacts on their businesses. Can the Minister say anything about that?

Matt Hancock: Gibraltar is, and will continue to be, part of the United Kingdom. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union leads on issues relating to Gibraltar. He will have heard those concerns and will be able to respond to them in detail. In a sense, all this shows why it is so important to get this agreement right.

Tom Brake: I thank the Minister for giving a detailed response. I just wanted to put on record my interest in relation to Gibraltar so that it is not missed.

Matt Hancock: I am glad that I gave the right hon. Gentleman the opportunity to do so. A strong relationship on data is beneficial to citizens as it will reassure them that their personal data is subject to robust protection. Maintaining the flow is also important. Once we have left the EU, we will continue to play a leading global role in the development and promotion of appropriate data protection standards with trading partners right around the world.

Stephen Timms: I am glad that the Minister is committed to seeking this adequacy agreement. Does he recognise that one step that will make that a bit harder—perhaps significantly harder—is the fact that under the terms of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, article 8 of the European charter of fundamental rights will no longer be part of UK law? That creates uncertainty about how our data protection law will work. Appeal decisions frequently refer to the actual article, which is part of UK law at the moment. Will he therefore support amendment 151 to the Bill, which would oblige the Government to put back into law the clear assertion that everyone has a right that their personal data is protected?

Matt Hancock: I thought that the right hon. Gentleman might raise that. I understand his amendment and the reason behind it, which is to ensure that what we are trying to achieve is achieved. However, the removal of the charter from UK law should not affect the substantive rights of individuals when their data is processed, because the charter is not the source of the rights contained within it. The charter was intended only to catalogue rights that already exist in EU law. As he knows, there is
not a charter of fundamental rights in the same way in UK law, and it is not necessary. Although I agree with the purpose and intent of what he is trying to achieve, which is to make it as likely as possible that we achieve the adequacy deal and the high-quality arrangements that we are seeking, the amendment is not necessary because of the nature of the charter.

I hope that I have managed to answer Members’ questions. Although I look forward to the debate, I think that we can see strong cross-party agreement on the importance of a high-quality data relationship with the EU once we have left, on ensuring that that works for citizens, businesses and individuals, and on ensuring that we can build on that relationship, which underpins so much in our modern economy.

1.48 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): First, let me apologise for my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) who has recently joined our team and would normally be speaking on these matters. He is currently fulfilling a prior obligation to speak at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. It is nice to have him on our team as we served together in the Cabinet Office in government, along with my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), and we all look forward to serving in government again very soon in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

If I may, I will just correct the Minister, who inadvertently misinformed the House. Of course, Gibraltar is not part of the United Kingdom. It is an overseas territory. It is technically part of the European Union, although it is obviously excluded from the customs union and the common agricultural policy.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. Of course, Gibraltar is part of the UK family. I should have been clearer about that, but I am glad that we have cleared that up.

Kevin Brennan: As ever, the Minister is modest enough to accept when he makes a mistake and correct the record.

There are few debates that are more important than those concerning trade, especially in the context of the decision of the UK to exit the European Union with all the impact that that could have on the UK economy. As the Minister quite rightly said, in the 21st century there is nothing much more important to trade than data. As we have heard, 43% of EU tech companies are based in the United Kingdom and three quarters of the UK’s number of issues including, among other things, existing surveillance practices. As Lord Stevenson said in the other place on Tuesday, several commentators have indicated that the current activities of British intelligence services could “jeopardise a positive adequacy decision” since data protection rules

Kevin Brennan: As ever, the Minister is modest enough to accept when he makes a mistake and correct the record.

Lord Stevenson asked the Government how they might square this circle, but unfortunately received no answer. I understand we will have the intense and unusual pleasure of a second contribution from the Minister in this debate—I foreshadow that by indicating to the House that I will also seek permission to respond on behalf of the Opposition in a similar fashion—so perhaps he could answer that question during his closing remarks.

The Government seem to have lost sight of the need to ensure continuity during the transition period and beyond. They must have measures in place to reassure all those businesses that have taken advantage of the UK as the gateway to Europe that they will pass the adequacy test and ensure that stability and certainty. Given that we need a new data protection regime for sharing data across the channel and the Irish sea, we may as well get this new regime right for consumers as well as businesses. At a time of increasing concern about the misuse of personal data by certain companies, is not there a need for a far more stringent regulatory structure than that contained in the Data Protection Bill?

Colleagues in the other place have already remarked that the tech giants that dominate the digital economy and the market for data have, for too long, got away with portraying themselves as purely neutral platforms. They are not, as each of their business models—not to mention their share value—is predicated on the data flows that they generate and monetise. It has become a cliché, but in a very real sense data is the new oil in the economy.
We should also speak about children in the context of data protection. The Minister did not mention this part of the Government’s plans in his remarks, but I hope he refers to it when he sums up. Children and young people are at the leading edge of the online world, with 75% of 10 to 12-year-olds and 96% of 13 to 18-year-olds using social media sites, with Facebook ranked at the top. Sadly, this has resulted in children and teens being treated as data assets by business, with their personal data stolen and sold without informed consent on a regular basis. That cannot be right. The Data Protection Bill represents an opportunity to right this wrong, but the current drafting of the Bill does not give us much cause for hope in that area.

The Government have chosen to derogate from the general data protection regulation, as the Minister mentioned, by setting the minimum age for a child consenting to the processing of personal data at 13 years of age, rather than 16. Why have they chosen to derogate in that fashion? As John Carr, a member of the executive board of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, which was set up under the last Labour Government, has noted, perhaps the age of 13 was chosen because when Ireland—where the big social media companies are based—decided on 13 years of age, the UK’s decision was all but irrelevant. Does the Minister agree with that? If that is not the case, what is his explanation for why the Government chose to make this derogation? They claimed in their statement of intent published in August:

“Child online safety is one of the top priorities for this government”.

If so, 16 would have been a better age, as Sonia Livingstone, professor of social psychology in the department of media and communications at the London School of Economics, has argued.

Some people might argue that a lower minimum age is good for younger people’s participation in the digital world, but evidence from the regulator, Ofcom, shows quite clearly that fewer than half of 12 to 15-year-olds can identify an online-sponsored result, let alone understand how companies exploit their personal data. If the Government insist on staying the course with regard to this derogation, they must at the very least guarantee to the House today that they will ensure a significant increase in media education and digital literacy among young people. I hope that the Minister will refer to that in his response. This returns us to the responsibilities of social media and other online businesses.

While we may debate where the minimum age of consent should be fixed, the fact that the Bill does not place any requirements on these companies to prevent under-age access to their services is a glaring oversight, especially from a Government who claim that child online safety is one of their top priorities. The Leader of the House so memorably described Jane Austen in this Chamber not so long ago as “one of our greatest living authors”—[Official Report, 20 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 1004.]

To paraphrase Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged that the Government are making a complete Horlicks of the article 50 negotiations, as we saw again just this morning. At least, they have now taken up our policy.

Matt Hancock: Just on a point of English language, it is clearly not a truth universally acknowledged, because I do not acknowledge it.

Kevin Brennan: Well, at least the Minister did not claim that Jane Austen was our greatest living author—I will give him credit for that.

I give the Minister and the Government credit for taking up our policy of having a transitional period with regard to Brexit to give themselves a little more time. The price of getting data protection wrong would obviously be enormous, because so many companies rely on transmitting data across the single market.

For many years, we have talked of the four freedoms—the free movement of goods, services, capital and people—but there is a fifth freedom, because, in reality, we have created one of the world’s leading regimes for data transfer, which has allowed our tech companies to grow, flourish and prosper. It would be a disaster if any division, dithering or incompetence around the Brexit negotiations now imperilled that achievement.

The Government have set themselves a very tight schedule for passing the Bill into law before the end of April 2018. As I have indicated, the Opposition will support the main principles of the Bill, but there is a great deal of work still to be done, with several areas needing to be scrutinised, and the Government need to be prepared to amend the Bill to rectify some of the inadequacies I have indicated during my remarks.

All of us in this place owe it to the public, and especially to children, to get this legislation right. We cannot afford to fail just because of the dysfunctionality at the heart of the Government, and I hope the Minister will not be complacent on that score.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I will not stray on to the issue of authors, living or dead, but I do want to address three issues in this important debate.

The first picks up from where the shadow Minister left off. As a London MP, one cannot but be aware of the significance of tech companies and the digital industry to our economy. That is part of what makes London the world’s financial capital, and getting our position right on these issues and maintaining it is absolutely critical to our arrangements going forward.

As hon. Members know, I come at this debate as someone who rather wishes we were not in this situation, but given that we are, getting the detail right is absolutely vital. I understand and support the thrust behind the Bill and what the Minister very fairly said in his opening speech, but the detail is terribly important.

Only this week, I was at a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on wholesale financial markets and services, where a number of representatives of the financial services sector, including Citi UK and UK Finance, raised the real issue that while we talk a great deal about the need to preserve regulatory equivalence and other means of achieving access to the single market once we have left it, data sharing is, to some degree, the elephant in the room and is often not spoken about. The director of one of London’s leading accountancy and consultancy firms described it to me as a huge issue that needs to be tackled.

2.1 pm
The Minister is right to recognise the issue, and the Bill, of itself, is right and proper, but getting the detail right will go well beyond that. When he replies, I hope he will be able to assure us that his Department and the other relevant Departments are keeping in close contact with our financial sector. There are people with massive expertise out there, and they are willing to help the Government on this, and it is critical that we get it right for the future health of the UK.

None of us wants to see London’s position as the world’s financial capital diminished, and that is not in the EU’s interests either, because, in many respects, London, as a financial and digital capital, has been a gateway into European markets for many third-country investors. We want that to remain the case, so getting these issues right is terribly important.

My second point was highlighted by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). I agree with him about Gibraltar, and I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar. I recently returned from Gibraltar’s national day celebrations, and you are fondly remembered there as an active former member of the group and as a good friend to Gibraltar, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Cross party, members of the all-party group were struck by the importance of this issue to Gibraltar. Gibraltar has revived its economy in recent years, moving away from what was essentially a garrison-type economy to an economy that is strongly based on financial services and online digital operations of a number of kinds—they are now the most important part of the economy. As the Minister says, Gibraltar is a successful part of the British family—a self-governing British overseas territory that is entirely financially self-supporting. It is to Gibraltar’s credit that it has been at pains throughout this period closely to mirror United Kingdom and European Union regulatory arrangements, and it ticks all the boxes in regulatory terms.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I think I am right in saying that the UK has the largest digital economy in the G20. If that is the case—it is obviously imperative that we are able to continue that in the years ahead—the impact of these issues will be just as great on Gibraltar, if not larger.

**Robert Neill**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The two key messages that one gets on this topic from Gibraltarians across the political spectrum and from all parts of Gibraltarian society are, first, that they do not want to be left behind in any arrangements that the UK makes with the EU27—they do not want to be collateral damage in any sense—and they want to maintain the arrangements and access that we have. Secondly, they want above all to maintain the closest possible friction-free trading arrangements with the UK, where a great deal of their service business is already conducted. Getting that right is terribly important for Gibraltar. It is a small economy with little other resilience, and it really needs our support in getting the data issues right to protect what is a very successful story for the British family.

My third point relates to legal matters. I take the liberty of reference to the Justice Committee’s ninth report from the 2016-17 Session of the last Parliament. As hon. Members will know, I have the honour to chair that Committee, and we issued a report on the implications of Brexit for the justice system. I hope we will soon have a response from the Government to that report; it is one of those that is in Ministers’ in-tray—or, I hope, out-tray—at the Ministry of Justice. Perhaps a gentle nudge might be delivered by those on the Treasury Bench to their right hon. Friends there.

The report is constructive and stresses the importance of information-sharing arrangements for the legal system and the justice system. Part of that relates to the UK’s legal services, and that links in to what I said earlier about the financial services sector in London. The legal service sector underpins a great deal of that financial services work, so getting this issue right is critical for UK firms contracting with parties in the EU or with third parties. At the moment, a great deal of work is written in English law, and that is a great advantage to us, so getting the data sharing right around all those matters is terribly important to the firms involved.

However, the other issue in our report, which is perhaps even more strikingly important, relates to information sharing on policing and critical justice co-operation. In many respects, we have led the field in this regard, and it will certainly not be the intention of the Government or of the Prime Minister, who both as Prime Minister and as Home Secretary has stressed the importance of this issue, to lose any of that information sharing. However, again, the devil is always in the detail in these matters, and perhaps I can highlight what the Committee found.

We took a considerable amount of evidence, and it is clear that the EU offers a number of information-sharing tools. I particularly want to highlight the importance of the European criminal records information system. We arc in that at the moment, and it was clear from the professionals in the field who gave evidence to us that we must do all we can to maintain access to that system. It provides access to accurate records of EU citizens’ offending histories.

It is perhaps worth putting on the record a quote from the National Crime Agency. Its evidence was: “Through ECRIS, the UK is able to exchange tens of thousands of pieces of information about criminal convictions each year that help police and other law enforcement agencies to investigate crime, protect the public and manage violent and sexual offenders.”

**Tom Brake**: Is the hon. Gentleman able to clarify for me whether that is one of the data exchanges that are subject to the European Court of Justice rulings to ensure safeguards for those exchanges of data? If I am correct, how does he see that relationship continuing with the UK post Brexit?

**Robert Neill**: My understanding is that it is likely to be subject to the ECJ, and we concluded that while we might seek to remove the direct jurisdiction of the ECJ in some matters, the idea that we will not have an ongoing relationship with the ECJ on such matters is unrealistic. That will be important.

We want to stay in ECRIS, but we noted that there are no previous examples of a non-EU member having access to it. We will have to seek a bespoke arrangement to achieve that, and I hope that Ministers regard that as a high priority.

**Vicky Ford**: On the subject of valuable data exchanges, does my hon. Friend agree that we also need to continue to exchange passenger name records, because that is
vital for our safety? The exchange of passenger name records was, of course, led through the European Parliament by a British MEP, championed by the Prime Minister and helps to keep us safe when flying.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is right and I pay tribute to the work that she did on this and several other issues for the United Kingdom during her time as a Member of the European Parliament.

The evidence given to the Justice Committee was clear that these are interlocking parts of a criminal justice co-operation system and we cannot cherry-pick some bits and not others. It is important that we find ways of maintaining equivalent means of access across the board on these criminal justice co-operation measures. I have mentioned ECRIS and I hope that the Minister will reassure us that finding a way to stay in it is a high priority for the Government.

We should also wish to remain in the second-generation Schengen information system as it gives the UK real-time access to all European arrest warrants. The European arrest warrant is a valuable tool and it is a great help to British law enforcement agencies. I say that as someone who worked as a barrister in criminal law for 25 years before I came to the House. That was at a time when we did not have that means of getting back from abroad villains who had committed crimes in this country. It is a great advantage that we do now have that ability, and since certain amendments were made to the way in which it operates, there are many more safeguards for UK citizens when an EAW is issued than was previously the case. It is a tool that has been refined and improved, and it would be a great advantage for us to stay in it.

SIS II—I apologise for all the acronyms—is also important because it contains, for example, alerts on missing persons. In all, it gives us access to 66 million pieces of data, which helps our justice system, and it is important that we continue to have access to it. The National Crime Agency said:

“Loss of access to SIS II would seriously inhibit the UK’s ability to identify and arrest people who pose a threat to public safety and security and make sure that they are brought to justice.”

I hope that the Minister will confirm that that, too, is a high priority for the Government.

Darren Jones: I stress my agreement with the hon. Gentleman’s remarks about these sharing systems. An example given to me by the Avon and Somerset constabulary involved the awful case of a member of the public viewing child pornography live in this country. Through data-sharing with the continent, the police services in Spain were able to raid the person delivering the data and bring to an end the crimes being committed here and in Europe. Such data sharing must continue, to protect our constituents and our friends on the continent.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is right, and that was the tenor of the evidence that we heard from all the law enforcement agencies. The benefits of data have also meant that crime has been internationalised in a raft of ways, including of course classic cyber-crime, but also in international fraud, organised crime and, sadly, sexual offences through the internet. Having a full range of measures to deal with those issues is critical.
judges work closely with their counterparts—and of course our membership of Europol are all part of a system that comes together to protect us in criminal justice and security matters. They were described by our witness Professor Wilson as part of a system that “you cannot disaggregate because, in my view, if you take out elements of the system, you have a less effective system for protecting British citizens on the streets.”

That was also the clear evidence from the Northumbria Centre for Evidence and Criminal Justice Studies. The evidence was overwhelming. Sometimes, as lawyers, we get cases in which the evidence all points one way, and that was very much our conclusion from the evidence to the Committee’s inquiry. These are all important matters. Of course, they are but one part of the data protection and sharing regime, but they are critical.

We received the clear message from practitioners that whatever we do and however we get to these arrangements—I hope that the Bill, when it is brought to the House, will help us to achieve this—the end state has to include a means of making sure that our data sharing and data protection regime are sufficiently close to those of the EU27. We shall, therefore, have to have a means of tracking changes and replicating them when it is likely to be to our mutual advantage to do so. Otherwise, with the very best will in the world, a law enforcement agency or police officer in the EU27 might not be able to share potentially critical information with his or her UK counterparts because he or she might find themselves in breach of the data regulations in his or her own EU27 country. That cannot be in anyone’s interest. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that creating such a system will be the centrepiece of our objectives on data sharing in relation to criminal justice and co-operation matters.

2.20 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): At the start of this week, the Prime Minister told the United Kingdom to be prepared for the possibility of a no-deal Brexit. The warning was clear and unambiguous that with gridlocked negotiations a no-deal Brexit was becoming increasingly likely. Of course, the effects of a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic. The consequences for our economy, our trade and our EU citizens are obvious, and they have been well documented. Less obvious, and among the multitude of hugely important issues that rarely make the headlines, is the impact on data protection of the UK leaving the European without a deal.

Data protection has been described by The Economist and others as:

“The world’s most valuable resource”.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) described data as “the new oil”. Currently, the UK Government define data protection as the controls on how personal information is used by organisations, businesses or the Government. Everyone responsible for using data has to follow strict rules, and they must make sure that the information is used fairly and lawfully. Information that is held on individuals can include their name, address, credit history, employment history, salary details and even internet browsing history. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members would wish some, if not all, that information to remain as secure as possible. Robust and strict data protection is therefore absolutely essential to avoid any improper use of that information, whether for online fraud or identity theft, and to keep it from falling into the hands of people or organisations with which we would rather not share it.

Data protection may not be something that we think about every day—indeed, it may not even cross our minds from one year to the next.—[Interruption.] Perhaps that is not the case for my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). Whether we think about data protection on a daily basis or not, its importance is not diminished. That is why it is absolutely vital that the level of data protection we currently enjoy as EU citizens is guaranteed on day one of Brexit, so that businesses and individuals can continue to rely on existing data flows. It is no exaggeration to say that millions of jobs across Europe rely on data protection and data processing to a greater or lesser extent.

As the Minister acknowledged, the security we receive from our data protection legislation already has a distinctly European flavour, originating as it does from the 1995 EU data protection directive, which was adopted into UK law in the Data Protection Act 1998. Since then, the way in which we create, collate, access and use data has changed enormously, as has the amount of data we create as individuals and as a society. In recognition of that, in 2016 the EU introduced a new legislative framework for data protection: the general data protection regulation, of which we have heard so much, and the police and criminal justice directive. Both those pieces of legislation form the basis of the Data Protection Bill that is in Committee in the other place. The regulations will apply in member states from 2018, and EU member states are required to transpose the directive into national law by the same date.

The Scottish National party agreed with the Minister when he said in February that the GDPR was a “good piece of legislation”. We were pleased that it was included in the Queen’s Speech and that the Government made it clear that our current data protection framework would be amended and made compatible, so that we can adopt the new regulations. We very much welcome the Government’s move to implement the GDPR, giving people more power and control over their own data.

In normal circumstances, I believe that that piece of legislation would be relatively uncontroversial. However, as it has done and I believe it will continue to do, Brexit makes the subject of data protection hugely problematic. If we are to leave the EU in March 2019, what is the future for our newly agreed and freshly implemented cross-border, pan-European arrangement with our EU partners? What will be the consequences for businesses and individuals if the UK suddenly finds itself on the outside without a deal to continue the free flow of data not just with the European Union, but with the safe nations with which the EU has secured a reciprocal deal? At a stroke, could the United Kingdom lose its right to exchange data with the United States, a nation on which the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade seems to be pinning so much hope for our future trade?

We are in an era in which geographical boundaries for data do not exist. Today, as probably every speaker in this debate has said, almost half the large EU digital companies are based in the UK, and a remarkable 75% of cross-border data flow out of the UK is with EU countries. We also have significant data flow with the United States, which occurs because we enjoy access
to the EU’s privacy shield agreement. There is no such thing as sovereignty where data is concerned. Currently, we are a signed-up member of an international network committed to safeguarding data. In this global economy, the unfettered free flow of data across international boundaries safely and without delay, cost or detriment is absolutely essential, not just for individuals and businesses but for agencies that need to work across international boundaries. We have heard about many of those agencies today, and they deal with matters such as crime prevention, disease control and national and international security.

For the UK to be able to take full advantage of the continued free flow of data with the rest of the European Union post Brexit, the most straightforward route would be for the EU to issue an adequacy decision. An adequacy decision, as we have heard, is given to a third country—a country that is outside the EU and the EEA—to allow it to operate securely and freely within the framework of the GDPR. It can be given to countries that meet the required standard of data protection, a criterion that currently applies to the United Kingdom. The problem is, however, that an adequacy decision is designed for third countries, and the UK is not—yet—a third country. Indeed, it will not be one until the end of the Brexit process. There is no existing legal mechanism to enable the EU to award an adequacy decision to a country in advance of its leaving the EU. As the leading data protection lawyer, Rosemary Jay, said, the EU has to go through a legislative process, and it is simply not in the EU’s gift to do this in an informal way. I cannot comprehend what the Minister meant when he said that he sought “something akin to” an adequacy deal.

Matt Hancock: The negotiation of the EU’s future relationship with the UK is not some sort of informal approach; it is a very formal set of talks. We hope that it will lead to a good deal, which we hope will include this area. That is exactly what I meant.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the Minister for his point, but I stress again what Rosemary Jay said: the Commission has to go through a legislative process, and it is not within the EU’s gift to do this in an informal way. There could be a further complication in the UK’s achievement of an adequacy decision. As the hon. Member for Cardiff West said, ahead of granting an adequacy decision the European Commission is obliged to consider a variety of issues, such as the rule of law, respect for human rights and legislation on national security, public security and criminal law.

That being so, there is a very strong suggestion that the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 may jeopardise the ability of the UK to receive a positive adequacy decision. The Investigatory Powers Act has already been accused of violating EU fundamental rights. Eduardo Ustaran, the internationally recognised expert on data protection law, has said:

“What the U.K. needs to do is convince the Commission—and perhaps one day the European Court of Justice—that the Investigatory Powers Act is compatible with fundamental rights. That’s a tall order.”

While the Government are understandably desperate to secure an adequacy decision, the harsh reality is that a lengthy and challenging legal process may have to be undertaken before that happens.

I fear the Government are in denial about this. Indeed, when questioned by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee back in February about what would happen on the day after Brexit if we do not have an adequacy decision in place, the Minister said:

“We seek unhindered data flows but we want that to happen in an uninterrupted way—that is to say, on the morning on which we have left the European Union, it is very important that our data rules work, so that there is an uninterrupted system in place”.

He is absolutely right—I could not agree more—but that did not answer the question about what happens if we do not have such an adequacy decision in place on the day we leave.

Just yesterday, at the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I asked the Secretary of State a very similar question about the need to have an adequacy decision in place when the UK leaves the EU. Her answer was that she was “very hopeful of getting that deal”.

I am sure she is and I wish her well, but at the moment there is no deal in place. The longer negotiations are at a stalemate, while we continue without the legal mechanism to get a third country deal, and, given the issues in relation to the Investigatory Powers Act, securing the agreement the UK needs and absolutely desires is becoming less and less likely.

Another potentially huge problem arises if we do not secure an adequacy decision by the day on which we leave the European Union, because not only will we be outside the EU and isolated from the other 27 member states, but we will also be outside the EU-USA privacy shield agreement. The consequences of that happening may be unthinkable for UK businesses and individuals, but it is absolutely incumbent on the Government to think the unthinkable and to be adequately prepared for it. Putting all their eggs in the one basket of hoping to secure a negotiated adequacy decision is a very high stakes game, so I again ask Ministers: where is the plan B should there not be an adequacy decision? What assessment has been made of the UK not having such a decision in place on the morning on which we leave the European Union, and when will Members of the House be able to see that plan B and that assessment?

Nobody wants such a situation to arise—we want a deal to be struck—but even if the Government’s faith is rewarded and we do secure an adequacy decision, the UK faces another problem. As the GDPR evolves over time, as it surely will, the UK, to maintain its membership, will be required to amend its data protection law to keep in line with European law. The EU charter of fundamental rights and freedoms is now central to EU data protection law, and the charter is interpreted by the European Court of Justice, yet clause 6 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill quite clearly states that EU courts will cease to bind UK courts and tribunals following withdrawal. I suspect that if the UK does manage to secure an adequacy decision, to keep it, it will have to full into line with the European Union Court of Justice.

As I said at the start, we welcome the Bill as a move to ensure that people have more control over their own data and to bring the legislation into line with the huge technological advances since the 1998 Act. We welcome the Government’s commitment to implementing the GDPR and to the UK remaining fully involved in protecting EU citizens’ data post-Brexit. We question, and we will continue to question, the Government on how they can take this
forward when an adequacy decision is not guaranteed and while there are still unresolved issues about the Investigatory Powers Act, at the same time as they are seeking to remove the UK from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice.

Of course, it does not have to be this way. The best, easiest and most straightforward way to ensure that there are no disruptions to data flows between the UK and the EU after Brexit is for the United Kingdom to remain a full member of the single market. The agony and the fear for millions of businesses and individuals of being cut off from both Europe and America if we do not secure an adequacy decision could be avoided by our staying in the single market. Why put people and businesses through this?

After all, no one in any of the nations of the United Kingdom voted to leave the single market. In fact, two of the four nations of the United Kingdom voted to remain in the European Union. We are in this situation because of the Conservative party’s extreme interpretation of Brexit, and that is why we are now actually having to prepare ourselves for what, hitherto, was unimaginable—a no-deal Brexit, with the catastrophic consequences that it will inevitably have for our society and our economy.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara). He is a near neighbour of mine geographically, although on political issues we seem to be streets apart. I was pleased to hear him say—I assume he was speaking for the SNP as well as for himself—that he wants a deal. We all want a deal. From the way SNP Members sometimes conduct themselves, we would think they take some perverse delight from the fact that we might not get a deal. We all want a deal, but I must tell him that, frankly, leaving the European Union means leaving the single market and the customs union. We cannot divorce those two things—it is the same thing. That was well rehearsed during the debate that led up to the vote last June.

Stephen Timms: Of course Norway is not a member of the European Union, but is a member of the single market.

Stephen Kerr: That is the worse-case scenario of being on the receiving end of a flow of regulation with no input or influence over that at all. No, leaving the European Union means leaving the single market and the customs union.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that leaving the single market and the customs union was not on the ballot paper when the British people voted?

Stephen Kerr: I do not think that there is much virtue in re-running the Brexit debate today, when we are discussing data, but I will say that it was well rehearsed, especially by the remain side, that leaving the European Union meant leaving the single market.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this debate, and I do so from the perspective of having spent the past 30 years of my life in the world of sales. I should declare at the outset that I am a fellow of the Association of Professional Sales, a UK institution with a fast-growing global reputation. Its primary purpose is to raise the standard of sales professionalism, ethical sales conduct, and the overall talent and capability of sales professionals.

I recognise that this debate is about data protection as we leave the European Union, but let me be absolutely crystal clear: I am optimistic about the future of our country outside the European Union. I am not blind to the challenges that lie ahead, but I encourage Opposition Members who have a decided propensity to take a dim view of our future to brighten up. We have a great deal going for us in this country, and rather than cowering at the prospect of a global Britain, we should now embrace the opportunity.

So much of our national sales capability, which will be key to our global success, will hinge on our commitment to embracing new technologies. We in this country are driving the fourth industrial revolution, and I want our country, by which I mean—before my SNP colleagues shout, “Which country?”—the United Kingdom and Scotland—

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): They are separate things.

Stephen Kerr: No, they are not separate things. I want our country to be at the forefront of this revolution, because it represents a massive competitive advantage and can be the primary means of unlocking the perplexing conundrum of Britain’s productivity gap.

The fourth industrial revolution is powered by data. It has already been said a number of times in this debate—perhaps it is a cliché—that data is the new oil. Increasingly, data makes the world go around. I am grateful to Guy Lloyd, a fellow of the Association of Professional Sales, for his graphic description of the digital age we live in, which is creating new information exponentially. Incredibly, 90% of data in the world today has been created in the past two years alone. Our current daily output of data is about the equivalent of 10 million Blu-ray discs which, if stacked, would be as high as four Eiffel towers. It does not take a genius to predict that, as the world becomes more connected and individuals become more empowered through technology, the data deluge will only increase.

Digital tools, fuelled by big data, are making it increasingly easy for business organisations to profile the marketplace they operate in, to identify the best potential customers for their business and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their lead generation activities. Using artificial intelligence search engines, businesses trawl company reports, social presence and analyst commentaries to find companies that are likely to have a problem suited to their offering, and then identify who to talk to and how to connect with them based on their prospects’ employee social profiles. Artificial intelligence will also identify problems in the prospect journey through the opportunity pipeline, even predicting possible issues before an initial engagement and suggesting workable solutions. The algorithmic examination of large amounts of data collected across the complex interactions of customers, and employees of customers, supports the design of much-improved customer experience. This is the world we are already living in.
Data protection should be about providing assurance that the data each of us provides to public bodies and private organisations is safe. The foundation principle of data protection must be trust. Each individual citizen must feel that their rights are protected in law, and they should also know that their rights are protected in law. The true focus of any data protection regime must be to provide reassurance to the individual citizen that their personal data is theirs to own, control and share as they choose and that they can make decisions to share their data on an informed basis. Public and private corporations must be accountable for how they use that information, and they must collect it ethically and transparently.

There is no argument from me about the fact that the data protection regime within the European Union is a robust system that has been designed to provide significantly enhanced rights and protections for individual EU citizens. My concern, however, is that data protection can also be a carefully constructed protectionist measure that works to the commercial advantage and convenience of some of the largest multinational companies. So often the voices of lobbyists and corporations drown out the better nature of our policymakers and, more often than not, that is certainly true of the European Union. EU regulations can become so complex and Byzantine that new entrants to the field—I am talking from a commercial perspective—from emerging markets are crowded out. I seek assurances from the Minister in that regard.

Some Members will undoubtedly be in favour of protectionist policies, but I believe in free trade. The EU has built a wall from such regulations—a wall that we must be ready occasionally to breach. From my own point of view, the idea of being able to interact with the 3.7 billion humans who are on the internet is not only desirable but vital for the growth of many companies beyond the relatively small numbers within the European Union. We can position Britain at the heart of this—from the Babbage engine to Skyscanner, via the work at Bletchley Park and Manchester 1. In my constituency of Stirling, an organisation for supporting emerging companies, Stirling, an organisation for supporting emerging companies, has recently located there. Students at Stirling University are learning about big data and analytics as well as machine learning. Further, the work carried out there on big data and analytics as well as machine learning will bear fruit long into the future.

We in this country have the skills and the knowledge. Members who think that we will sink without the EU have little faith in the spirit of the British entrepreneur. Brexit gives us the opportunity to think globally, and think globally we shall. Rather than the existing adequacy model of the EU, we need to consider partnerships based on a shared understanding of privacy rights and a shared goal of ensuring that consumers give informed consent to their data being used. A shared international framework would give surety to companies operating globally that there are common standards to adhere to, at the same time as protecting consumers.

Kevin Brennan: I am listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman’s speech. If he is saying that we should not participate in the adequacy arrangements, is he disagreeing with the Minister’s comments that we should have an arrangement akin to the adequacy requirements?

Stephen Kerr: No, I did not actually say we should not participate. I am saying that we should think further afield and establish relationships that involve agreements on a shared understanding of what privacy rights are, and we should ensure that consumers outside the EU, too, give informed consent to their data being used. A shared international framework would give surety to companies operating globally.

Many people of my generation will be disappointed that instead of personal rocket packs we have mobile phones and Twitter, but there is something about our modern life that fills me with hope. We can come closer together as a world community of individuals living together, with more respect for our fellow beings, as we see the barriers of culture, language and custom fall around us. But we need to be prepared for the times in which we live. We owe it to the people of our country and to our companies to keep our regulatory regimes up to date as technology changes and emerges. Our laws should be responsive to change and adaptive to the social and economic changes that technology brings about. I believe we can achieve that far more readily in our own Parliament and that we can make the UK a world class data-safe partner.

Privacy and the protection of our data are vital, given the way we live today. We create footsteps and tracks in all aspects of our life, whether through the purchase of a product at an online shop, the presence of our mobile phone accessing a public Wi-Fi, or the use of a social media platform. Every aspect of our lives can be and is recorded by companies that use complex algorithms to profit from this information. Let us be honest: this can often lead to greater convenience for us as consumers. The way we surrender our personal data can be considered transactional. We surrender some of our personal freedom to get access to a product or service that we want. This needs to be made clear to people who often access services without knowing the sacrifices that are being made to their privacy. People might think they are getting things for free when in fact they are paying with their valuable personal data. Sometimes this is a good deal but sometimes it is not, and it is for informed consumers to make that choice. Rights enshrined in law should be clear and easy to understand. The use of personal information should be subject to regulation, but not in such a restrictive way as to make it impossible to handle. Informed consent should be our watchword.

The internet is the best vehicle for economic growth that we have, and with data being produced at a rate of 2.5 billion gigabytes per day, it is not going away. It is also a tremendous opportunity. Our responsibility as lawmakers is to anticipate and follow technological change, and to understand how the technologies and habits that our people form require new protections in law. It is also our responsibility to ensure that the laws that we make are proportionate and do not generate a protectionist climate for our companies, but instead protect our citizens.

I believe that this is another area of public policy where the opportunities presented to us by Brexit are substantial. We can make our laws more responsive;
we can break down barriers to trade with consumers around the world; and we can build a proper data protection regime that protects our citizens.

2.49 pm

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and will pick up on one or two of his points.

David Cameron has a great deal to answer for. To win support from his party’s right wing for his leadership bid in 2005, he promised during the leadership campaign to withdraw Conservative MEPs from the European People’s party, the main centre-right grouping in the European Parliament, and he delivered on that commitment after the European elections in 2009. By pushing his MEPs to the fringes in the European Parliament, he significantly reduced British influence there and more widely in the EU’s structures, which meant that Britain did not get its way in Europe on an increasing number of issues, by contrast with previous Governments, both Labour and Conservative. The referendum result—the decision to leave the EU—was the inevitable outcome of that spiral of loss of influence, kicked off by his commitment in 2005.

One way to look at the referendum is as a choice between sovereignty and prosperity. In the referendum, the country chose sovereignty, and of course that was a wholly honourable choice to make, but we need to be honest now about the resulting loss of prosperity. Leaving the EU, if it is seen through in the way envisaged now, will make us poorer. Ministers need to stop pretending otherwise, for their own sakes, as well as for the sake of the country, because once the reality becomes clear, the punishment inflicted on the Conservative party will be all the greater if people have not been told what is ahead.

An official in Germany put it to me like this a few months ago: “If you want the benefits of the single market, you have to obey the rules of the single market.” Ministers continue to tell us that we can have the benefits but no longer obey the rules, but that will not be the outcome of these negotiations. It couldn’t possibly be because, if it was by some fluke the outcome, Germany and lots of other Parliaments in the EU would surely vote it down when asked to decide on the deal.

This week, we have at least had some recognition of that reality from the Prime Minister. She has announced that in the transition period from April 2019 we will continue to obey the rules. The wrt of the European Court of Justice and the free movement of people will continue into the transition period. As far as I could understand it, the announcement in her statement on Monday seemed to be that we would stay in the single market and the customs union, other than on name. I presume that this is a face-saving device to avoid the embarrassment of a clear U-turn. It would be much better to be honest and commit to staying in the single market and the customs union during the transition period at least, as argued by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. The Prime Minister’s announcement does at least hold out the prospect of delaying the damage to our prosperity for a couple of years, but we need to recognise that that will not avoid the damage to our prosperity altogether.

The challenge is perfectly illustrated by the subject that we are debating this afternoon, and I welcome the fact that the Government have given us the opportunity to have this debate. Mr Speaker characterised my interest in a different area of policy earlier this week with the phrase, “some would say anorakish”. How much more that applies to the area of policy that we are debating this afternoon. The Minister was absolutely right in his opening remarks to underline just how important this policy area is for our prosperity. It underpins the wellbeing of the economy. Indeed, there is growing evidence that one of the reasons why we have failed on productivity growth in the UK in the past few years by contrast with other countries is that the internal management of companies in the UK has been digitised to a lesser extent than elsewhere. If we are to make progress on that—it is vital for our prosperity that we do—then data communications will be even more important in the future than they have been in the past.

I very much enjoyed and appreciated the contribution of the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who chairs the Select Committee on Justice. He underlined, quite apart from the economic considerations, how vital it is for our security and safety that we can continue to communicate personal data with other European Union countries.

The Minister was right to make the point at the outset that our data protection laws in the UK originated with an EU directive in which the UK was very influential. The Conservative Government who negotiated that directive had a powerful voice at that time. Sadly, as I explained earlier, more recent Conservative-led Governments have had a much less powerful voice.

**Matt Hancock:** I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the British MEPs had a strong influence on the GDPR as it was developed in Europe. One of the reasons the GDPR is a good piece of legislation that we can happily bring into UK law is because of that influence. We had that influence after we had left the EPP, so perhaps he will withdraw his earlier comments. As for this argument about lack of influence, the chair of the justice committee in the European Parliament is a British Labour MEP, so is he saying that the lack of influence that he describes is because of the Labour party?

**Stephen Timms**: No, certainly not. I am delighted that my Labour colleagues in the European Parliament have retained their place in the Socialist group and therefore their influence. The problem for Britain has been that, by leaving the EPP, Conservative MEPs have had much less influence. I am not saying that they have not had any influence—that is not at all the point I am making—but they have had a great deal less. Therefore, the British Government have been much less able to get their way in Brussels than previous Conservative and Labour Governments, and that is what inexorably led to the referendum result.

The key foundation stone for data protection regulation in Britain has been article 8 of the European charter of fundamental rights, which states:

“Everyone has the right to the protection of personal data concerning him or her.”

The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—the Minister and I had an exchange about this earlier in the debate—removes the charter of fundamental rights from UK law,
so article 8 will no longer apply. The Select Committee on Exiting the European Union took evidence on that point from lawyers yesterday. Sir Stephen Laws, former first parliamentary counsel, argued that the removal of article 8 was a good thing because nobody can quite know exactly what it really means, so that we end up with judges deciding in appeal cases, which makes the law uncertain. He made a very reasonable case. Far better, he said, for Parliament to decide the detailed law and regulations, so that everyone knows where they stand.

However, Dr Charlotte O’Brien of York Law School pointed out that in practice, judges deciding points of data protection law in Britain often refer explicitly to article 8. A reading of their judgments suggests that article 8 frequently sways the decisions that they reach, so it is likely that its removal will mean that their future judgments will be different from those that they have made up until now. We can have an interesting debate about which arrangement is better, and, as I have said, I think that Sir Stephen Laws made a perfectly good case. Our problem, however, is that we have to achieve a declaration from the European Commission that UK data protection law is adequate. That is crucial for the future of our economy.

Matt Hancock: A point that I hope will reassure the right hon. Gentleman is that EU jurisprudence will be brought into UK law through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, although EU jurisdiction will no longer continue.

Stephen Timms: The proposal is that article 8 will not be there any more. The problem is this: where in the European acquis, which is being brought into UK law, is the clear statement that everyone has the right to have their personal data protected? It is not there, and if it is not there, it will be significantly harder for the European Union to recognise that UK data protection law is adequate.

Matt Hancock: This is an incredibly important point, so I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. The right is there: it is in the GDPR, which will be brought into UK law through the Bill.

Stephen Timms: The problem is that it is not. There is no clear assertion anywhere in UK law—other than, at present, in article 8—that everyone has the right to have their personal data protected. As I have said, and as was said in the Select Committee yesterday, judges, when making judgments on these matters in appeal cases, often refer to the wording of that article to reach their conclusions.

There is a perfectly good case for arguing that it is better not to have these slightly vague declarations, because the law is clearer if it is all spelt out in legislation that has gone through Parliament, but our problem is that that is not how the matter is looked at in Brussels. Over the next year and a half or so, the Minister has to persuade people in Brussels that our data protection is adequate, and if we no longer have a clear statement in UK law that everyone’s personal data is protected, that task will be a good deal harder.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making extremely important points. The very fact that we are having the debate shows that there is uncertainty. When those who may be not so friendly to us in other parts of Europe are looking for cause to be difficult, does that not absolutely give them that cause?

Stephen Timms: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on data analytics, my hon. Friend is in a very good position to understand just how important this is for our economy. He is absolutely right: if we open up that uncertainty in our regulatory arrangements, it will be harder, perhaps impossible, to achieve the adequacy agreement that we need.

I am grateful to the Minister for committing himself to seeking that adequacy agreement. Like the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), I was slightly concerned about what he meant when he referred to something “akin to” an adequacy agreement. What we need is an adequacy agreement that is formally defined. We need that declaration from the Commission, so that UK businesses can continue to exchange personal data with businesses in other EU member states.

Mr Tammanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and some very pertinent points. Many tech firms and other companies in my constituency are concerned: we need to have such agreements in place—in particular, on data protection—and not having them in place will have a hugely detrimental impact. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Stephen Timms: The firms in my hon. Friend’s constituency are absolutely right. If we do not achieve that adequacy declaration, it will become illegal for personal data to be exchanged between the UK and the countries of the EU, and there will no longer be a lawful basis for large swathes of businesses in the country to continue to operate.

Kevin Brennan: Perhaps we can draw an analogy with my right hon. Friend’s earlier remarks about the customs union and single market and say that the Government are seeking an adequacy agreement, but not in name on this occasion.

Stephen Timms: The problem is that if it is not an adequacy agreement in name, it is not clear what it is. /Interruption./ Yes, an inadequacy agreement, perhaps.

We also need this to be clarified soon, because otherwise businesses will have no alternative but to make arrangements to shift the activities into the other EU countries to avoid the risk of them no longer being lawful—and if this is left to the last minute, with some late-night deal at some distant point, these companies will have gone.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman, a fellow member of the Exiting the European Union Committee, agree that one way to sort this out is by amending the Data Protection Bill—in effect, by transferring the wording of article 8 into that Bill?

Stephen Timms: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work on that Committee, and his suggestion could well solve the problem. What I have proposed is amendment 151 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, to require Ministers to put on to the statute book a clear statement that UK citizens have a fundamental
right to the protection of their personal data. But he is right that we could equally well insert that wording into the Data Protection Bill, which is before the House of Lords at present. I should also point out that, splendid though it is, I cannot claim credit for the wording of my amendment, as it was drafted by techUK, in recognition of the issue’s importance to the industry.

I want to make a final point about the Data Protection Bill and postal direct marketing. I welcome the fact that the Government are implementing the GDPR, or general data protection regulation, but the Bill changes the basis for opting out of postal direct mail communications. At present, if somebody does not want to receive advertising addressed to them through the post, they can opt out by signing up to a register. As I understand it, the Bill will change that and companies will not be allowed to send people postal direct mail unless they opt into receiving it. I think that is the current arrangement for direct email, but there has been an opt-out arrangement for postal direct mail until now. There is a lot of concern that that change would be very damaging to the UK direct mail industry, which is a substantial industry, and that it is not required by the wording of the GDPR; indeed, legal advice has been taken on this point and the GDPR does not require that change to be made. If that is right, the Government are gold-plating the regulations that have come to us from the EU. They are absolutely right to be implementing the GDPR and to be doing so scrupulously, but they should not be gold-plating them, as I fear they might be in this case.

I am grateful to have had the chance to set out to the House a bit more fully the thinking behind my amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, and hope I might have persuaded the Minister that, after all, it might be an amendment that he can support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am delighted to call to make his maiden speech Mr Matt Western.

3.10 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate. Although I have spoken several times already in the Chamber, questioning the Prime Minister and other Ministers, this is indeed my formal introduction to the House.

The past five months have been extraordinary, and it is a great honour for me to represent Warwick and Leamington, a constituency that also includes the town of Whitnash and a number of villages. I wish to place on record my thanks to them. I would also like to thank my predecessor, Chris White, for the work he did as a constituency MP, and specifically his support for the charitable sector and the local games industry. He served the community well, and I wish him well. It is work that I will most definitely build on.

It is a happy coincidence that my maiden speech should coincide with the news, published yesterday in The Independent and by the BBC, that Leamington has been declared the happiest town in the UK. Delightfully, the survey that led to this finding was conducted after 8 June, which doubtless explains everything.

My constituency is not only the happiest place in the UK. Apparently, it was one of the first provincial towns in England to possess the other key attribute of happiness—a good range of Indian restaurants. You do not need to take my word for it: whilst a predecessor, Sir Anthony Eden, liked to quote from Shakespeare, in this instance I am going to quote from the historian, Lizzie Collingham, author of a definitive history of curry:

“Leamington was one of the first provincial English towns to have a selection of Indian restaurants. The area’s very proximity to Coventry and Birmingham, where many of Britain’s Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants found work in the car industry, made it, where Indian food is concerned, one of Britain’s pioneering towns. It still is.”

As if to underline that, one of our very many local establishments was proclaimed winner of Midlands Curry House of the Year and shortlisted for the national awards. So none of you should need any inducement to visit the locality—and you will be most welcome.

But good eating is not all it has to offer. My constituency has been home to such luminaries as Joseph Arch, a 19th-century pioneer in unionising agricultural workers and in championing their welfare. Arch also agitated for the widening of the franchise—ambitions that were to some degree fulfilled in the Representation of the People Act 1884. In the ensuing 1885 general election, Arch was returned as the Liberal MP—we can all make mistakes—for North West Norfolk, making him the first agricultural labourer to enter the House of Commons.

My constituency was also home to Randolph Turpin, who was considered by some to be Europe’s best middleweight boxer of the 1940s and ’50s, and went on to become the undisputed middleweight champion of the world, in defeating no less than Sugar Ray Robinson. And it was home to Sir Frank Whittle, one of Britain’s greatest inventors, the creator of the jet engine, and indeed once to my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), the as-yet-unknighted Toby Perkins.

Warwick is famous for its glorious castle, the seat of the legendary kingmaker Guy of Warwick. It is the medieval county town for a shire that once included both Birmingham and Coventry. Today that would be some county. Leamington, its noisy neighbour, is perhaps now the happiest town in the UK but was certainly not favoured by the late John Betjeman in his poem “Death in Leamington.” Fortunately, Betjeman saved his greater wrath for elsewhere, famously inviting “friendly bombs” to rain down upon a different town. In fact, despite being a major manufacturing centre, the constituency was not the victim of significant bombing in the second world war, unlike neighbouring Coventry, sadly, but during the war it was the seat of an important team of camouflage—artists and engineers who played a leading role in developing the art and science of camouflage. It is interesting that one of the constituency’s most significant contributions to the defence of our country back then was through design.

Design and innovation permeate the recent history of our towns. In the post-war period, the legendary Donald Healey set up his car business on the Emscote Road in Warwick, going on to produce some of the finest sports cars the world has ever seen. Not far away, Malcolm Sayer was designing the E-Type Jaguar. I am proud of my constituency’s impressive contributions to design and technology and its continuing role in developing innovative technologies of all sorts. That continues to this day with the world-leading Warwick Manufacturing Group, which is part of the University of Warwick and has collaborated with industry, Government and other
universities in developing battery cell technology, new materials, and digital applications. It is therefore no surprise that what is still referred to as the gaming industry finds itself home here. Along with Dundee, it leads the industry with more than 50 local businesses, employing 2,500 people and generating £188 million in turnover, and it is about to grow exponentially. I am proud that it is leading the revolution in not just virtual reality, but augmented reality. I can honestly say that I have seen the future—through a headset.

The constituency’s relative economic buoyancy is exactly that: relative. It has depended on the single market and the customs union, together with our openness to attract people of all sorts from Europe and around the world have made the area their home. As Leamington’s proud restaurant history reminds us, it has also long been home to distinguished communities originating from the Indian subcontinent, who have played, and continue to play, an important role in the economic and cultural life of the west midlands. By way of example, our magnificent gurdwara is now celebrating its 50th year. That diversity explains in part my constituency’s openness to international business and migration. It voted remain in the EU referendum. Since the vote, residents and representatives of Warwick University, Jaguar Land Rover and other businesses have consistently voiced their concerns to me about the impact of Brexit. They tell me that they simply want clarity and certainty—urgently. Economic matters are critical in their planning, and they expect Government responsibility, not party infighting. I am confident that they would agree with me: no deal, no way. They are right to worry.

The prolonged lack of clarity over the post-Brexit landscape on the British economy is an issue for the majority of my constituents. Some have already voiced their concerns about potential exclusion from the EU’s data protection framework, which would impede the continued free flow of data among EU and EEA states, with that which businesses and the economy will suffer. The Lords EU Select Committee states that we are facing a dangerous cliff edge in that regard. Data is critical in our society and for our businesses, but we need strong safeguards. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) about what data means, particularly for the younger generation, who, interestingly, can be viewed as a data commodity, but we must not allow our young people to become a commodity.

My constituents are already noting Brexit’s impact on the region’s ability to attract and retain the talented skilled workers on which it relies, and they are worried about the continuing weakness of the economy overall. The economy is extremely fragile and vulnerable to currency fluctuation and interest rate changes. Since 2015, we have witnessed a surge in unsecured household debt, which has reached levels not seen since 2007-08. Consumption growth—the sole driver of the UK economy for nearly a decade—is faltering, partly because much of that growth was driven by the £35 billion windfall that households received in PPI repayments. That is some economic stimulus by any measure. The effect of that short-term windfall is now tailing off. Since 2011, that extraordinary, one-off cash injection helped to fund, for example, higher retail car sales and new kitchens, but for little longer. Car sales have been falling since April 2017, which is as good an indicator as any that consumer confidence is declining significantly. Investment growth—the real driver of wealth—has failed to return to the UK after the financial crash of 2008, but only here. Growth in all other developed nations now exceeds the UK’s.

Like so many of the Government’s claims, assertions about Conservative economic competence have proven ill-founded. UK debt has continued to rise. The Government have failed to meet their own economic targets. Real wages have fallen by 15% for many in the public sector and have been stagnant for most. CPI inflation is rising and will soon exceed 3%. Household budgets are being truly squeezed. Sterling has fallen by up to 20%; by contrast, personal unsecured debt has sky-rocketed.

Individually, those elements would be concerning enough; together, they augur serious concern. At the same time, the cost of housing is rocketing. In my constituency, average rents have increased by 26% in the past six years. In the past 10 years, only 50 council homes have been built in the area although 2,400 people are on the housing waiting list. Last year, 705 people applied as homeless to the local authority—130% up on 2010, compared with a 29% increase nationally over the same period. Some 3,600 people in my constituency regularly use our food banks. There are several night shelters in our towns and in recent months the numbers attending have doubled. The work there is increasingly important and I place on the record my thanks to Margaret, Chris, Susan, Vishal and all the other volunteers.

Quite simply, the housing market is broken. As has been confirmed by a Prime Minister not known for her Marxist principles, the energy market is also broken. As with so many Government announcements these days, it is too little, too late. Energy is ripe for revolution and it is vital that we should take this opportunity to democratise it. That will bring prosperity to all, as well as address the urgent crisis of climate change.

In his maiden speech in 2010, my predecessor stated that Warwick and Leamington had excellent frontline services. He was right: in 2010, we did. Seven years on, we do not. We have lost police—in Warwick, we have lost the police station. We have lost teachers, full-time firefighters, and health professionals from the NHS. Many are demoralised. I will not continue because all hon. Members face the same reality in their own constituencies.

What can we do? The International Monetary Fund has one suggestion: rebalance the tax system. A report just published by the IMF finds that higher income taxes for the rich would help reduce inequality without having an adverse impact on growth. Perhaps implementing some of the Labour party’s policies would be a good start to getting us on to a more secure economic footing as we face the enormous disruption of Brexit. Perhaps that is an announcement for next week. My constituents, whether residents or businesses, need, now more than ever, a strong Government ready to protect jobs, deliver a shared prosperity and enable all to flourish. Above all, I will speak for them. That is the vision that I will represent in Parliament. I thank hon. Members for their attention.
3.23 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on his excellent maiden speech. It is a delight to hear that his constituency is such a happy place to live in. As the representative for Chelmsford, I inform the House that Chelmsford, too, is one of the happiest places to live in the country. Long may the hon. Gentleman and I have that in common. I listened with interest to his potential solutions for the British economy. We all want to find those. I do not believe that increasing taxes is a solution; sadly, that could lead to less demand for the Jaguar Land Rovers that the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is so proud to produce.

This debate is vital. Data is the lifeblood of the modern economy. Our ability to analyse vast quantities of it has totally transformed our understanding of the planet in which we live, of how we interact as a society and even of the very make-up of our bodies. Data is revolutionising our healthcare with amazing personalised medicines. The chief executive of our civil service explained earlier this year how data is fundamentally changing the delivery of the civil service, with huge benefits to improve the experience of the citizen, make Government more efficient and boost business in the wider economy. Consumers benefit, too. Data means we can access online goods, services and digital content never before thought possible; we get increased choice through cross-border platforms and cloud computing; and this underpins so many of those key financial services that consumers take for granted today.

The digital world is borderless, and the ability to transfer data seamlessly across borders is what underpins so much of our trade with Europe today. As I said in my earlier intervention, techUK suggests that the UK is home to more than 10% of all global data flows, with three quarters of those flows being between the UK and the rest of Europe. That data flows because of trust, and data protection is key to keeping that trust and fundamental to maintaining this trade. There are no World Trade Organisation backstops for data, and, as the Minister has said, securing an adequacy agreement is a priority, as it must be. Crashing out of Europe without a deal on data would not be a good deal, for our tech, medical and research sectors, for consumers or for our financial services. That is why it is so important that we make sure that there is an adequate deal on adequacy.

The GDPR set the global standard on data protection, and, as some in this House have mentioned, the UK was crucial in delivering that deal. The committee in the Parliament was chaired by a British Labour MEP, and a lead negotiator was a British Conservative MEP who now sits in the other place. On this side of the channel we should not underestimate how sensitive the issue of the treatment of personal data is. In Britain we have a long history of freedom, but in other countries in Europe people have sometimes found that their personal data has been abused by their state and their liberty has been constrained. The right to privacy of personal data is a treasured, fundamental right, which is why it is such good news that our Bill on data brings the principles of the GDPR—the European regulation—into British law. As the Minister correctly said, the digital world is continually evolving, so we need to be ready to evolve our digital legislation continually. That is why I was extremely pleased to hear the Prime Minister talk in her Florence speech not only about ensuring we have the same standards and regulations as we leave Europe, but about how she is committed to delivering an ongoing regulatory dialogue on such key issues and areas.

I do not wish to underestimate how challenging it will be to ensure that we deliver the data adequacy agreement. I remember spending time in Washington and Brussels during the EU-US privacy shield negotiations, and that was the No. 1 issue being discussed in the Oval office and at the top of the European Commission. It was the top priority, rising above everything else on the agenda. Nevertheless, on data there is good will on both sides to get a deal.

Jeremy Lefroy: Given my hon. Friend’s experience in the European Parliament, does she agree that it is not only vital that we get the right agreement as we come out of the EU, but that we establish the right arrangements for the ongoing updating of our law in co-operation with other jurisdictions such as the EU or the USA? It is not just a one-off task; it has to be ongoing and the Government need to ensure that the right systems are in place so that it is ongoing after we leave the EU.

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is spot-on correct. We need not only to get things right and workable on the day of exit, but to maintain an ongoing relationship. As the Prime Minister has said many times, we are not leaving Europe; its countries will remain our closest neighbours and currently account for nearly half our trade. Ongoing co-operation on issues such as data protection is not only vital for our future but will help us to continue to lead the global dialogue in this policy area.

Some people seem to think that European politicians want no deal; I do not believe that to be true. From the conversations I have had, I believe that the vast majority of politicians throughout Europe want an ongoing, deep, bespoke partnership with the UK, and data is just one of the many areas in which they want that. Just this morning I welcomed to the House a colleague from the European Parliament: the Spanish lady MEP who helped me to deliver, through the EU, the end of mobile phone roaming charges. She is a leading light in digital policy and an excellent ally on digital issues. She explained to me how right now, throughout Europe, they are looking at the free flow of non-personal data. The UK called for legislation in this area, and Europe is now delivering. The leadership on the issue in the European Parliament has just been allocated to a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists—the Government’s European sister party.

We continue to want to lead and work on these issues, not only up to the time of Brexit but in co-operation thereafter. I say again: crashing out of Europe with no deal will not be good for the UK or for Europe, and it is not what the vast majority on this or the other side of the channel wants.

Vera Hobhouse: I was in Brussels a couple of weeks ago, and as much as it is true that our European partners would like a deal, they are perplexed by the attitude of the British Government, who simply do not enter into proper negotiations.
Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but I simply do not agree. On issues such as digital data and digital transfer, the UK continues to lead, has an ongoing dialogue and is engaged. The fine details of the negotiations are moving forward. Nobody ever said it would be easy. We do need to keep focused on delivering a deal, not on throwing mud at each other.

Let me make a few points about the Bill, as I do believe that it is great. As Opposition Members have suggested, techUK has raised concerns about whether the withdrawal Bill will give all the necessary powers to bring the GDPR into British law and whether the right to personal data is clear enough in British law. I was very pleased to hear the Minister say that he wants to ensure that there is an absolutely seamless transfer of what is currently held in European law on to the British statute book. We need to ensure that the tech sector is absolutely happy with the way that that is worded. That does not necessarily need to happen through the amendment to the withdrawal Bill, but we need to ensure that the Minister’s stated intention of a seamless transfer is delivered.

I wish to ask the Minister one question. One of the fine details of the GDPR is to make sure that it is implementable without putting an unnecessary handicap on businesses or other organisations that need to be able to analyse data to use it for the benefits of society. There is some concern that the Intellectual Property Office in the UK may be gold-plating a little through some of its draft guidance. In particular, the data controller is asking organisations to name third parties who would rely on an ongoing transfer of data, whereas the GDPR says that they need to give only the type of category—not the name of the individual organisation. We need to be especially careful that we do not gold-plate, or cause companies to have to put in extra constraints.

Fundamentally, the ability to collect, communicate and understand data is pivotal to a modern economy’s success. It needs to work not just in the UK, but across borders. This is a massive step in ensuring that we will continue to act as good neighbours both to Europe and others in the way that we treat personal data. I am delighted to see that we are moving on with that process.

3.37 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my regional neighbour, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on his excellent maiden speech? He started by suggesting that he was going to talk about happiness. He almost did, but I simply do not agree. On issues such as digital data and digital transfer, the UK continues to lead, has an ongoing dialogue and is engaged. The fine details of the negotiations are moving forward. Nobody ever said it would be easy. We do need to keep focused on delivering a deal, not on throwing mud at each other.

Some have described the movement of data across Europe as the fifth freedom. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) made exactly that point. I suspect that most of us, and most of our fellow citizens, are only dimly aware of what actually happens to our data, but it does really matter. The design, extent and provisions of the British data protection framework will have profound implications for the nature of UK-EU trade relations. Today’s debate is particularly timely given the proceedings on the Data Protection Bill that are already under way in the other place. It is vital that we get this framework right.

I chair the all-party group on data analytics, and I have seen at first hand the way in which data has moved to the centre of every sector. Wherever we go, people are talking about data. I hope that the Minister will accept an invitation to meet the all-party group fairly soon to talk about how we can build awareness not just of how transformational this is likely to be, but of how complicated it will be to ensure that we get it right.

As we have heard, data is an increasingly valuable commodity, with the UK conducting three quarters of its cross-border data exchange with the European Union. The EU data economy was worth €272 billion in 2015 and has continued to grow rapidly since.

We have played a key role within the European Union in developing the GDPR, which will come into effect in the UK from May 2018. The European Commission proposed this new legislative framework back in January 2012 as an update and a levelling mechanism to protect citizens across Europe. It has taken five years of discussion and hard work for the regulation to be agreed. This significant measure for the UK does a number of things. It significantly widens the definition of personal data, transforms the notion of consent, carries severe fines for companies in case of non-compliance and fundamentally alters the way in which companies can store and process personal data.

Back in February, the Minister told the House of Lords EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee that the GDPR was a “good piece of legislation”, and I welcome the Government’s sensible decision to adopt the GDPR into UK law. But, as many have pointed out, there are problems ahead, not least with some elements of the relationship with the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. Both techUK and Ukie—the Association for UK Interactive Entertainment—which covers things such as video games, highlighted that concern when the Government published their paper in August, and both noted that the paper did not address an issue that the Government knew to be problematic.

Why would it matter if data flows were interrupted? Well, we are good at data in the UK. Our digitally intensive industries account for 16% of gross value added, 24% of total UK exports and 3 million jobs. The digital sector is growing 32% faster than the national average. We are at a significant competitive advantage in the digital economy. At 10% of GDP, the digital economy makes a larger contribution to our economy than that in any other G20 country, so it really matters to us. Beyond that, it is a vital enabler in the overall UK economy and society. We are increasingly digitised, with all sectors increasingly reliant on data flows. They underpin retail, health, finance, manufacturing and the automotive industries, to name just a few. The Government have confirmed that:

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“Over 70% of all trade in services are enabled by data flows, meaning that data protection is critical to international trade.”

That confirms that they do understand and appreciate the importance of data protection.

Additionally, data flows benefit consumers, allowing innovation in products and services, streamlining performance in industry and improving global communication. They reduce business costs, leading to more investment in research and development, and improve productivity. In some ways, the problem is that our membership of the European Union gives us special advantages. In a profound irony, we actually have more control over our own privacy regime when we are within the European Union than we will have when we are outside it. Let me explain how that comes about.

Outside the EU, we become a third country in terms of our relationship with the European Union. The Government say that the best way forward is an adequacy agreement, or something akin to one, which would need to be secured with the European Commission. There are alternatives, but they are difficult, unstable and particularly ill-suited to UK businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises. The large corporations may be able to manage, but the small businesses will not. UK firms, particularly the start-ups in my part of the country, would have to jump through hoops and hurdles that their European counterparts would not have to. While our companies would be spending time and money agreeing standard contractual clauses with customers, their EU counterparts and competitors would simply be getting on with business.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Many smaller companies in particular are not aware of what is coming down the road and what sort of extra work they will have to do.

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Much work needs to be done to raise awareness of what the GDPR will mean. That is a challenge, but it is a good thing in general. The worry is that if it will not be available for our smaller companies in the future, that already challenging task will be made even more difficult. In fact, it will be so difficult in many cases that small companies in areas like mine will simply up sticks and go somewhere else where the process is easier.

I fully recognise the points made by Government Members. They understand a lot of this and say that an adequacy decision would be the best possible solution to ensure the “unhindered exchange of data within an appropriate data protection environment”.

The partnership paper clearly states that future data protection co-operation “could build on the existing adequacy model”.

If we are to achieve that objective, ensuring the continued alignment of the UK’s data protection framework with the EU’s will be key. That should, therefore, be the primary consideration in any discussion of the provisions of the Data Protection Bill. Any deviation from the provisions of the GDPR could put at risk achieving a successful outcome as we seek an adequacy decision.

We also need to look to the future, because if we do get that adequacy agreement, given the close alignment of UK and EU data protection frameworks, the Government must prioritise ICO involvement in the formulation of future EU data protection provisions. As we have heard, the EU will inevitably update the GDPR as time and technology progress. However, we risk these changes being dictated to us and a duty needs to be placed on the ICO and the commissioner to maintain regulations that keep the UK adequate with the latest version of EU law. Even if we can achieve that, there is a great irony here, in that we will, effectively, be dictated to—it is not quite the taking back control that some were seeking.

Perhaps more important is that just saying that we would like an adequacy agreement is not the same as actually getting one. We might wish for one, but will we be able to have it? Will others agree? There are various problems, which I hope the Minister will address. The first is time. Obtaining an adequacy decision is feasible only for third countries. It follows that, to get one, the UK will need to have left the EU at the time of the ruling, which leads to the very real danger of a data protection cliff edge. In evidence to one of our Committees, Stewart Room, head of data protection at PricewaterhouseCoopers, said that obtaining such a decision could take “many, many years”. So this week’s talk of no deal is highly risky when it comes to data. The risk of a cliff edge is very real and very dangerous.

Then there is the Investigatory Powers Act. There is a danger that some of our neighbours may no longer be inclined to share data with a country that takes a different view on privacy issues from them. As members of the EU, our different traditions are respected; as a third country, things could be very different. The provisions in the Investigatory Powers Act, and the current investigatory practices in our intelligence services, which allow the police to access personal data such as communications or internet data without a requirement for independent judicial approval or for the issue being investigated to be of a certain seriousness, will be a legitimate concern for some countries in the EU when negotiating an adequacy agreement. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what work has been done on this and what assurances have already been received.

The ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union in the Watson case with regard to the UK’s surveillance and bulk data retention regime is also important. The Court’s decision stated that the UK’s surveillance and data retention laws—then the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014—exceeded the EU’s view of what is strictly necessary and appropriate. That model of retaining communications data is broadly mirrored in the new Investigatory Powers Act—the replacement for DRIPA. It is hardly inconceivable, therefore, that the EU could decide that the UK does not reach its standards for adequacy. On this rather complicated set of issues, I should say that I am grateful to Renate Sampson of Big Brother Watch for explaining some of these points to me.

My next concern was about the European charter of fundamental rights, but it has already been touched on in the excellent discussion triggered by the contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), whom I will be supporting in his efforts to secure amendment 151 when we discuss the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

There is a further point about that Bill. We know that it is controversial and that there are concerns that ministerial alterations can be made without parliamentary votes.
If the GDPR were to be altered during the repeal process, and citizens’ personal data rights were in any way diminished, we could be prevented from being anywhere near the level of protection deemed adequate by the EU. The Information Commissioner has made it clear that for the UK to achieve the gold standard of data protection regulation and enforcement, the right way forward is to fully adopt the GDPR, and that position must be maintained.

UK businesses and organisations have already started preparing for the GDPR, which is good. That should stand us in good stead when it comes to an adequacy discussion. It is vital that we enshrine the GDPR in our law permanently in a clean Data Protection Bill, so that data can still flow, businesses can still run and communications do not just stop. However, it is of the utmost importance that we commit to these rules for the long term and provide certainty for individuals and businesses. The economic consequences of not being able to move personal data would be very serious, with companies having to double-store data. That would take a long time to implement, and it would have serious economic and environmental costs, and run the risk of our not being able to operate properly across borders. It would, at a stroke, put at risk the UK’s place as a global hub for tech and other data-intensive industries. There is a huge amount at stake.

There is, of course, a simple alternative that looks more and more obvious with every passing day to some of us, as Brexit morphs into wrecks-it. But until we reach the point at which sense prevails, I hope that the Minister will share with us information on the work being done, especially on fine-tuning the relationship between the GDPR and the IPA, to ensure that the data keeps flowing and we can remain part of the modern world.

3.50 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on his maiden speech, which reminded me of a happy childhood visit to Warwick castle. I am sure that he will make fantastic contributions to the House in the future.

The transfer of data is critical for the functioning of our economy. The proper management and control of data is increasingly a matter of civil liberties. Roughly 70% of the UK’s trade in services is reliant on the free flow of personal data. The EU’s data economy is expected to be worth £643 billion by 2020 and millions of UK businesses are possible because the global data protections law and are essential for our tech industry in the UK. They are possible because the UK—from May 2018, creates and enhances data protections and rights for EU citizens in continuity with the principles of article 8 and the CFR more generally.

Much is made of the EU’s novel right to be forgotten, but the GDPR also speaks to the issue of algorithmic decision making and processes that significantly affect users every moment of the day for most of our citizens—the Minister is probably being affected right now, as he is on his phone. It also creates a right to explanation whereby individuals can ask for details on how decisions about them were made—for example, on access to credit. As such, the GDPR creates a requirement on those designing algorithms and evaluation frameworks to avoid prejudicial decision making and to enable easy explanations for users.

Those rights and norms are at the cutting edge of global data protections law and are essential for our tech industry in the UK. They are possible because the EU is developing its data protection laws in accordance with the principles expressed in the charter of fundamental rights. However, the Government have made it clear that the charter will not form part of domestic law on or after exit day. As such, significant divergence from EU data protection norms may begin sooner than expected, putting our tech industry in incredible jeopardy.

Once the UK has surrendered its place at the EU’s decision-making table, as is the Government’s intention, our ability to exert influence on the future of EU data law will be greatly diminished. Not only are we presented with yet another possibility of the UK being demoted from rule maker to rule taker, but the constant anxiety that the UK may fall out of compliance with EU data laws is deeply unhelpful to individuals and UK businesses of whatever magnitude. If compliance with the charter of fundamental rights is required in practice to secure regulatory harmony and thus business confidence, the Government’s commitment to jettisoning the charter appears increasingly odd.

As the Minister asserted, the Government’s future partnership paper presents the adequacy model as the basis for a future UK-EU agreement on exchanging and protecting personal data. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said, the alternatives—making use of binding corporate rules or standard contractual clauses—would be burdensome, costly and create considerable uncertainty for individuals and businesses. Given that a post-Brexit UK will find itself in a position of unprecedented alignment with existing EU laws and norms, it does appear that an adequacy agreement is the most sensible way forward. The UK—it is hoped—will be designated by the European Commission as providing adequate protection for personal data, and it will be business as usual.

As the House of Lords European Union Committee has made clear, however, even if the UK positioned itself in perfect alignment with EU rules as it exits, it is very likely that the EU will amend or reform its data law in the near future, thus threatening the UK’s adequacy status. Divergence between the EU and a post-Brexit UK may come sooner rather than later.

In 2009, the EU’s charter of fundamental rights became legally binding. The charter codified existing EU rights and principles and is now the source document for EU fundamental rights. Article 8 of the CFR covers the protections of personal data—the right to privacy and the right to data protection that serves as the foundation for the EU’s data protection law. The European Union’s general data protection regulation, which will apply in the UK from May 2018, creates and enhances data protections and rights for EU citizens in continuity with the principles of article 8 and the CFR more generally.

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Securing the free flow of data, especially for an economy such as ours that is largely service-based, should be a pressing imperative for the Government. Ensuring that individuals are protected by rigorous data protection laws should be a top priority for the Government. I think it prudent therefore that the Government look again at their intention to bin the charter of fundamental rights as part of their EU withdrawal plans.
3.55 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I declare my interest as set out in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for the excellent curry in his constituency. As one of the few vegan MPs, I will happily visit and partake of the curried tofu if there is a vegan option; perhaps it will be better than that served in the Members’ Tea Room, grateful though I am for the option.

I was somewhat confused when I saw this debate on the Order Paper, not least because the Data Protection Bill is in the other place and scheduled to arrive here in due course, as the title was, “Exiting the European Union and Data Protection”. I therefore came with great hope—indeed, hope is the watchword of today—that the debate might be about some updates on how we will seek an agreement on adequacy with the European Union. Given that we are relying on hope and on some form of adequacy agreement—to proceed without an adequacy agreement would be, much like the rest of the Brexit policy, completely incoherent—I hope that the Minister will keep us posted on the progress that is being made towards an agreement, the timelines for doing so and the headway made in conversations about it.

We have a very short period in which to implement complicated and wide-ranging new laws. The Data Protection Bill, as we have heard today, incorporates not just GDPR issues for non-EU areas of competency, but matters of law enforcement and other things that have wide-ranging implications for our country and our laws. Those things must fit around the GDPR, which, as I said in my earlier intervention, will probably become law through a statutory instrument under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I restate my ask of the Government that we should have the opportunity to debate that statutory instrument in substance in this House, not least because some of its important provisions will require debate to guide businesses in my constituency and across the country on their application. An example concerns the right to human intervention when a decision has been made using profiling and automated processes—things such as algorithms. Many of my hon. Friends and other members of the Select Committee on Science and Technology will be looking at that issue, but some have grave concern about whether, when we bring in machine learning and changing algorithms, it is even possible to deliver the right to human intervention.

The Bill, which already covers many areas of law, is the start of a wider conversation that includes the network and information security directive and—to go to the important question of marketing, which my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) spoke about—the e-privacy regulation. How will those things fit together? How will businesses, charities and other organisations, many of which do not have rooms full of lawyers and compliance specialists to help them to implement the law, know how everything fits together?

The Prime Minister and—dare I say?—her most ill-informed Brexiteer MPs seem happy with the idea of a no-deal hard Brexit. Many people can visualise lorries in Dover and in the port continent. The same would be true for data. With a hard Brexit, there would be a standstill, and there would be blockages on the border for data. Much as with the goods in those trucks in Dover and in the port of Avonmouth in Bristol North West, that would be a disaster for business, consumers and importantly, as we have heard, for policing and the prevention of criminal activity.

Alison Thewliss: The issues that the hon. Gentleman is setting out are crucial to the whole Brexit debate. Would he agree that one of the major inadequacies of the debate until the referendum was that such issues were not debated and that they were not well understood?

Darren Jones: I agree with that sentiment. Dare I say it, but very few Government Members are present? Although my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham said this may be an anorak issue, it is in fact crucial to our economy, our new civil liberties and the type of country we want to live in. We should be having such a debate, and I again restate our request that we should do so in this House not only on the Data Protection Bill, but on the GDPR statutory instrument.

I am looking forward to the Data Protection Bill and I am excited about the Committee stage, but I will take this opportunity to address some of the strategic issues that many Members have mentioned: first, the basis of data protection law in the European charter of fundamental rights, on which I will not revisit the arguments already made but will, I hope, add something interesting and new to the debate; secondly, the incoherence between the necessity to mirror EU law and the Government’s illogical policy approach on Brexit; and finally, the rights and protections of children.

First, as we have heard in this debate, the Government have made it clear that the European charter of fundamental rights will be revoked under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. The Minister said that the GDPR in effect says the same thing, but article 8 of the charter, which underpins the GDPR, is referenced in article 45 of the GDPR. If the GDPR is referencing out to statutory, fundamental rights and we take that anchor away, we must replace it elsewhere. I will therefore support the amendment to the Bill proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham, to ensure that that happens.

Matt Hancock: I am sorry to intervene, but I have already explained that because European jurisprudence is being brought into UK law, references to the charter in existing case law will be brought into UK law, which satisfies the hon. Gentleman’s demand.

Darren Jones: With respect to the Minister, I am not persuaded that that will be agreed by the European Commission. Of course ECJ jurisprudence will be Supreme Court jurisprudence in this country and will be referenced by judges in that Court, but without a statutory anchor ensuring that the fundamental right is, in their view, in favour of the consumer and the data subject, we risk divergence on the application of the rules.

I want to mention the right of collective address. Under the GDPR, bodies can campaign and bring actions against data controllers in the interests of consumers and data subjects as a whole. This works very well in other areas of the law in this country, such as the Consumer Rights Act 2015. Under that Act, Which?, as a private enforcer against unfair terms, can act on behalf of consumers. For some reason, the Government have decided not to adopt such an approach in the Data
Protection Bill. I look to the Minister in his closing remarks to explain why he does not think organisations should be able to bring actions for collective redress on behalf of data subjects. Many data subjects may not be able to enforce their own rights as individuals but rely on such organisations to act in their interests.

On fundamental rights more broadly, I am still confused. I hope that the Minister will provide clarification in this final debate of the week by showing how, although we must maintain fundamental rights, we are also removing them. It is much like being in the single market and leaving it, much like being in Europe but not being in Europe, and much like protecting fundamental rights and not protecting them. What is the answer? The Data Protection Bill seeks to ensure transparency and accountability, and in the light of that theme, I hope the Minister will respond on fundamental rights.

Secondly, if we are successful in seeking an adequacy agreement, it is then for us to maintain equivalence as part of that developing area of EU law, as other Members have said. That will require the UK to adopt the decisions of the newly created European Board, which is subject to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice. Yet the Government insist that we can be both in and out, which is ludicrous, as I have said. They also say that we can be in it without being subject to the rules, but we know that that is a fallacy. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government’s policy is to get an adequacy agreement either this year or next year, only for it to be revoked in a few years’ time because we do not want to be subject to the jurisdiction of the ECJ? We must be subject to its jurisdiction if we are to maintain adequacy, but we will be forever on the cliff edge of being concerned that adequacy will be removed—as it was from the United States of America by the European Commission—and that is the risk our businesses, our consumers, our charities and others fear.

Lastly, I wish to address the rights and protections of children. I will return to this topic in detail on Second Reading. It is a great disappointment that the European Union has backtracked and pulled back slightly on this issue, so that instead of having a harmonised rule saying that children deserve extra protections—especially in the context of understanding how their use of online products and services means giving over personal data, how that personal data is profiled and how advertising is targeted on children—the European Union decided to provide member states with a range of ages to choose from, from 13 to 16.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) said, the UK opted for the age of 13 as the minimum GDPR requirement. I think that is the wrong decision and, according to polls by YouGov, 80% of parents agree with me. However, I encourage us to be intelligent about the way we regulate to support children. It is obvious that if we put in these frameworks children may find ways to use the systems anyway. No doubt there are a number of children under the age of 12 and 13 using social media sites today. We must make sure that the regulation is—dare I say?—with the kids. It needs to make sense and it needs to work properly. I look forward to having that debate and no doubt a shared aim.

As we prepare for the arrival of the Data Protection Bill, this is the first glimpse of a major piece of proposed legislation that highlights the enormous challenges with implementing Brexit. It is not just an issue of primary law for many of the issues we have talked about today; it is about clear rules and about compliance by those subjected to it. On clear rules, I refer to comments made by the Baroness Lane-Fox on Second Reading in the other place, when she pulled out a particularly entertaining section the Data Protection Bill, which reads:

“Chapter 2 of this Part applies for the purposes of the applied GDPR as it applies for the purposes of the GDPR... In this Chapter, ‘the applied Chapter 2’ means Chapter 2 of this Part as applied by this Chapter’.

Other than that sounding like something out of the ‘Yes Minister’ comedy series, it says to me, as a former lawyer, expense. People will be concerned—quite frankly, charities and other groups will be terrified—about getting this wrong. They will have to endure huge compliance costs in trying to implement what should be clear rules into their business.

Following on from what the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) said—she is not in her place—on compliance and guidance from the ICO, I stress this point with the Minister: many businesses want to do the right thing. They wait on guidance from the ICO and others to tell them what the law means and how they will seek to enforce that law. However, much guidance has either been delayed or is not yet with us. The guidance that has been provided is not, in many cases, sufficiently clear either. We must support the ICO properly to ensure it can provide that service, and we must make sure that people know how to comply with the law.

The UK is, as we have heard, one of the world’s leading digital economies. Bristol is one of the largest digital economies outside of London, and we lead the way on these issues in the world. We have the opportunity to set the tone in becoming a global hub for the world’s digital economy based not only on trust, accountability and security, but on business innovation and leadership. I look forward to helping the Government in this House to get that right.

4.7 pm

Vera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on his excellent maiden speech. What an honour it must be to represent such a happy, diverse and—may I say?—sensible community. No deal, no way. I completely agree. His constituents seem to be much more clear-sighted than some Members on the Government Benches. May I remind the Government to start taking the Brexit negotiations seriously? May I also remind the Government that the British people deserve the right to have their personal data protected, both here in the UK and cross-border? As we have heard today, there are many complications post Brexit.

The cross-border general data protection regulation will be brought in by the EU and be applicable here in the UK in May 2018, but there is no clarity on how data protection will be regulated in post-Brexit Britain. That is entirely a matter for the phase 2 negotiations and we have not even started them. Business needs clarity. Data protection regulation is a vital issue for the technology sector. This will affect the sector in every way, whether it is for individuals buying something online or logging
on to Facebook, or for large companies operating internationally. As we have also heard today, the tech sector is one of the UK’s success stories. It provides 10% of our GDP, 24% of our exports and over 3 million jobs.

Data protection is central not just to the tech sector but to our whole economy. Any business of any size needs to be able to transfer data across borders safely. If we leave without a deal on data protection, British businesses will not be able to operate internationally. So much for the Government’s vision of a global Britain! We have already seen how Brexit is beginning to damage the economy. The uncertainty facing the tech sector is just another example of how serious a no-deal scenario would be for the whole economy. Conservative Members cannot claim to be the party of business if they can seriously say that no deal is better than a bad deal—no deal is the very worst deal possible.

The Government say they will negotiate an adequacy agreement or even an enhanced agreement, but as we see time and again, what they say they will get and what they actually achieve are often very different things. While the EU general data protection regulations will come into effect in 2018—before we leave—the European Commission will still have to agree that the UK is providing adequate data protection after we leave. A few years ago, however, the European Court of Justice deemed aspects of the UK’s Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014 as illegal. Ironically, the case was brought to the ECJ by the right hon. Member who is now the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

That demonstrates that the UK has a history of failing to comply with EU data protection laws. Once outside the EU, the Commission will regularly review whether it thinks UK data protection regulations are acceptable. We will have to agree with its regulations, which are under ECJ oversight, but without having a say over them. That will be the reality post Brexit, and it is important that we all come to terms with it. Frankly, I doubt whether the Government in the Brexit negotiations will even get to the issue being discussed today. This week has been full of talk of no deal. The clock is ticking, and as we heard today, the negotiations in Brussels are deadlocked. It is for the Government to unlock that deadlock. The Prime Minister has the cheek to say the ball is in the EU’s court. I say that the Government have failed even to pick up the racket, let alone hit the ball over the net.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on an incredible speech. It is always a pleasure to listen to Members’ maiden speeches, and I enjoyed his as well. I am not sure I will go to Leamington Spa for my holidays, but none the less I was greatly intrigued by his presentation.

It is hard to pick up a newspaper, listen to the radio or follow the news today without hearing about Brexit and its impact on the UK. Normally when there is good news, it is presented as being in spite of Brexit. That kind of rhetoric is not helpful. The fact is that a majority of 17.4 million people, of whom I was one, voted to leave the EU. A majority of my constituents voted to leave as well. We are now upholding that decision, as is only right in a democratic society. Of course, it is right and proper, as we are doing today, to discuss the implications and solutions surrounding the decision and to recognise the opportunities that Brexit can bring for the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

In July, the House of Lords European Union Committee examined the impact that Brexit would have on data protection in the UK. At the time, the conclusion was that there was a lack of detail about how the Government would maintain the flow of data post Brexit, as others have said. Under the EU’s data protection framework, a country outside the EU and EEA is classed as a third country, and personal data can be transferred to a third country only where adequate protection is guaranteed. Since the Lords Select Committee published its findings, the Prime Minister has announced a transitional period after the UK leaves the EU in March 2019, meaning that we can safely secure an adequacy decision from the European Commission. Since the Government have continually stressed their desire to secure the unhindered flow of data between the UK and the EU post Brexit, that seems a very desirable solution. I believe it is one that everyone in this House—everyone who has participated in this debate and those who have not—would want to see.

Regardless of Brexit, it is important to remember that we are already experiencing a change in our data protection laws. The Queen’s Speech included plans to secure a data protection framework that is suitable for a new digital age. Unsurprisingly, the way in which data is used and processed has changed significantly since 1995. The purpose of the new Bill will be to implement the general data protection regulation. Research shows that some 80% of people feel that they do not have complete control over their data online. The Information Commissioner’s Office, the data protection regulator, will also be given more power to defend consumer interests and issue higher fines. Implementing the GDPR, which the UK is due to do on 25 May 2018, will ensure that the UK meets its obligations while remaining an EU member state, but it will also help to put us in the best position to maintain our ability to share data with the EU and internationally when we leave. Given that more than 70% of all trade in services is enabled by data flows, it is not surprising that data protection is so critical to international trade.

There is a lot of doom and gloom among some sections in this House and also outside, but it is important to remember how successful the UK is, particularly in data protection—something that I am confident will improve even further with the new Data Protection Bill, as I am sure the Minister will confirm in his summing up. The UK is one of the leading drivers of high data protection standards across the globe. Data flows are important for both the UK and EU economies and for wider co-operation, including in law enforcement. I think we can all agree that it is vital for keeping our countries safe, which is a critical factor.

In 2015, the EU data economy was estimated to be worth €272 billion, which is around 2% of EU GDP. Estimates suggest that its value could rise to €643 billion by 2020, or more than 3% of GDP. This growth is subject to legal and policy frameworks being put in place. Estimates suggest that around 43% of all EU digital companies are started in the UK and that 75% of
[Jim Shannon]

the UK’s cross-border data flows are with EU countries. Analysis indicates that the UK has the largest internet economy as a percentage of GDP of all the G20 countries and has an economy dominated by service sectors, in which data and data flows are increasingly vital. The UK accounted for 11.5% of global cross-border data flows in 2015, compared with 3.9% of global GDP, but the value of data flows to the wider economy is even greater. Surely these statistics are evidence of the need to continue and secure the flow of data between both the EU and the UK.

The GDPR has a number of provisions, including the transfer of personal data to third countries and international organisations. To that end, it puts the Commission in charge of assessing the level of protection given by a territory or processing sector in a third country. Achieving an adequacy decision from the European Commission, while completely possible, is not guaranteed—other Members have also put questions about that. For example, Canada has been approved for only certain types of personal data. If for whatever reason the UK’s laws are not considered to meet the adequacy standard, businesses in the UK would be subject to the same restrictions that currently apply to data transfers from the EU to the US. Surely early certainty about how we can extend the current provisions, alongside an agreed negotiating timeline for longer-term arrangements, will give businesses on both sides certainty for the future. I understand that everyone wants to secure an agreement on data sharing with the European Union as quickly as possible, but will the Minister clarify the Government’s position on what will happen if we do not achieve approval from the Commission?

I want to conclude with some remarks about Northern Ireland, because it is important to get this on the record. We are all aware in this House of the special case that those of us in Northern Ireland find ourselves in. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that will share a land border with an EU member state. As with many other things, specific thought will need to be given to the impact of data protection matters not only in Northern Ireland, but across the whole United Kingdom. For example, if for whatever reason we are unable to secure an agreement or an adequacy decision, any Irish company with a UK base will find itself in a difficult position, which could have implications for us in Northern Ireland.

Earlier this year, KPMG considered this issue and found that where an Irish company has a UK-based operation and holds, for example, payroll data about Irish or other EU nationals in that UK base, it may need to start considering whether it relocates that base to another EU state. Alternatively, the company may instead have to adopt standards compatible with the new EU rules, such as binding corporate rules. Otherwise, unless and until the UK receives Commission approval, or some form of bilateral agreement is reached, any transfers of payroll data from Ireland to the UK post Brexit will fall foul of the GDPR. It is also worth noting that any company that is found to have transferred payroll data in breach of the GDPR may be subject to a fine amounting to 4% of its global turnover, or £20 million. If a company had offices in Dublin and Belfast or Dublin and London, for example, that could—or would—present a significant problem.

When it comes to our joint security, sharing personal data is essential for our wider co-operation in the fight against serious crime and terrorism. Between October 2014 and September 2015, the UK Financial Intelligence Unit received 1,566 requests from international partners for financial intelligence, at least 800 of which came from EU member states. The UK is instrumental in contributing high-quality information, analysis and expertise in areas such as passenger data and financial intelligence. It also gains considerable benefit from the information provided by other member states in bringing criminals to justice within its own borders.

Data-sharing is a vital part of our counter-terrorism strategies. The Europol website recognises the importance of working not only with the EU but with its international partners. It points out that “organised crime does not stop at international borders...it is also essential to have cooperation initiatives with...non-EU States and international organisations”.

That makes clear the shared understanding that keeping our countries safe is widely accepted as being non-negotiable, both within Europe and internationally.

Often, when we consider threats of terrorism, we look at the physical attacks, but while that cannot and must never be overlooked, we must also consider the way in which the use of data is changing. It is changing continually; it is changing as we sit here. As it becomes more sophisticated, the number of cyber-threats from state and non-state actors increase, and those threats do not respect borders. Earlier this year, the WannaCry ransomware infections caused thousands of simultaneous cyber-attacks to be recorded across the globe, affecting more than 100 countries in a co-ordinated breach of IT systems in both private and public sector bodies. As technologies evolve and cyber-threats grow, it is vital that law enforcement keeps pace and develops capabilities to stay ahead of attackers whom we must work together with our European and international partners to defeat.

As has already been mentioned, the increasingly international, borderless nature of criminal activity makes the swift and efficient availability of data essential to modern law enforcement. The ability of law enforcement agencies to conduct point-to-point data exchange is critical to developing lines of inquiry, identifying suspects, and taking appropriate action.

I will end my speech now, because I have been told by the Whips to conform to a certain time. I appreciate that I have covered a number of topics—as have all the other speakers—but I think we can all agree on the importance of securing an agreement with the European Union, so that we can continue to share data in the same way as we do now. That will ensure that businesses in the UK, and those from EU states with UK bases, can operate as they have done previously. It will also enable our countries to continue to co-operate in vitally important areas, sharing data and information in the fight against terrorism and criminality.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments. As a Brexiteer, I am sure that we are moving forward in a constructive and positive way.

4.23 pm

Kevin Brennan: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker.
This has been a very interesting debate. It has, in a sense, been the First Reading of a Bill, which is an innovation on the Government’s part. Although the Bill is currently in the House of Lords, I suspect that there may be a degree of repetition when it eventually comes here for its Second Reading. However, I am sure that the Minister’s Second Reading speech will be completely original, and will not contain any of the information that he has given us this afternoon.

The debate has also been very well informed, and we have heard from Members on both sides of the House. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) drew attention to the importance of tech companies in London and to the importance of bespoke arrangements for when Britain leaves the European Union. The Scottish National party’s Front Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), expressed many of the views that I think we share, and I am sure that they will be developed on Second Reading and in Committee. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who is no longer in the Chamber, spoke about the accountability and ethics involved in data use and said that he was a champion of free trade. I was not entirely sure that I grasped how his point about adequacy “akin to” adequacy, but he gave his own explanation nevertheless. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) was, as usual, erudite and informed, but never anorakish, in his contribution and made some extremely important points about free trade. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) was, as usual, erudite and informed, but never anorakish, in his contribution and made some extremely important points about free trade. He told us of his chairmanship of the all-party group on data analytics. We should thank it for the briefing it supplied ahead of this debate, which was very useful, and should also mention other briefings that were supplied but not referred to during the debate, such as that from the Association of British Insurers, many of whose points have come out in general debate in any case.

Showing the talent on the Labour Benches, we also had excellent contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Alex Sobel) and for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), and I hope they will serve on the Bill Committee, as they could both bring great forensic analysis to the scrutiny of the Minister, who I know, having debated with him before, welcomes that immensely from the Opposition in Committee. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West outed himself as a lawyer in this area, as I was hoping that we might spring him as a surprise on the Minister, but now I know he will be going away and doing research on my hon. Friend. We also had a contribution from the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who pointed out the importance of a good Brexit deal and the damage that uncertainty is causing to business.

Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), a very popular Member of this House, who was still able to make a very good speech in spite of Brexit. As ever, he was fluent and assiduous in his contribution, and he pointed out the special position of Northern Ireland, having a land border with the EU post Brexit, which we must never forget is a key issue.

I will not repeat the points I made in my speech, but I remind the Minister that I asked him to explain, and hope he is able to, the thinking behind the Government’s derogation on the minimum age for a child consenting in respect of the processing of their personal data at 13 years rather than 16 years. If he can rehearse that for the House at this point, it will perhaps be helpful when we consider it further down the line when the Bill comes before us, as it will if he also responds to the key points made in the debate by me and other Members in relation to adequacy, security and so on. We look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the debate.
that is so important there. He spoke of history and the future. As the Minister for the gaming industry and for VR and AR, I am thrilled to hear that he will continue to champion them; I look forward to engaging with him often.

I was delighted to hear that Leamington is the happiest place to live. Funnily enough, I thought that was Suffolk. I give the hon. Gentleman a gentle warning about hostages to fortune: he very gently and elegantly took the credit for Leamington’s being the happiest place in the country, so now we all know where to look if it all goes wrong.

I almost called the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), my hon. Friend because we have spent so much time together in Committee in the past. I look forward to doing so again in future. I was surprised to learn two new things about him. I am astonished that he has university-age children; he looks as though he has barely left university himself. And he says he is delighted that the former Member for Warwick and Leamington, Chris White, is no longer in the House because he is a double. He can imagine how I felt when Mike Hancock was defeated!

The hon. Member for Cardiff West asked some serious and important questions. First, he raised the question of parental consent at the age of 13. There is flexibility in the GDPR legislation to set the age of parental consent at any age between 13 and 16. In the UK that age is effectively 12 at the moment—although it is not set in the same way—which means that we are raising the age. We of course recognise the fundamental role that the internet plays in the lives of teenagers, and we agree that it is vital to educate children, not only on the positives of the internet—coding has been in the curriculum for three or four years—but on the risks. The internet safety strategy published yesterday stated that we will do more to educate children about safety, but online platforms also give children educational and social resource, and the rules need to be realistic if they are to work. We do not want to introduce an unworkable rule.

This is a balanced judgment, but I believe we were right when we chose the age of 13. It was suggested that we did so because the Irish Government decided on 13, but the point about GDPR is that what matters is whose data it is, so it is not a question of the dataset in which the data is stored; it is a question of how old the child is.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West, and several other hon. Members, asked about the adequacy of our national security legislation. We are already compliant with EU law on data protection, with the Intellectual Property (Unjustified Threats) Act 2017, and we will be after exit. We are confident that that legislation should not present a significant obstacle to negotiations, not least because we have one of the most robust oversight frameworks in the world, and we brought into judicial oversight as part of the move from the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014 to the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

We heard an excellent speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who argued that how data rules relate to finance is a huge issue to be tackled. He is absolutely right, and we do have regular discussions with the financial sector. None of us should forget his point that it is in the interests of both the UK and the EU to get things right. We will help to ensure that Gibraltar has market access to the UK, which my hon. Friend cares about. That may require a degree of regulatory equivalence, and he knows that those discussions are ongoing. Our intention to maintain the data relationship for law enforcement purposes is clear, which is why we are putting the law enforcement directive into UK law as part of the Data Protection Bill. We want to continue to have a strong partnership with the EU. There is no legal barrier to the EU establishing an international agreement giving third countries access to SIS II and the European Criminal Records Information System. We are exploring a full range of options, but much of the detail will obviously be down to the negotiations.

I am delighted that the Scottish National Party supports our approach, and I am grateful for the support of both the Scottish Government and the SNP Members here. When the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) said that what I had said previously was absolutely right, I started to worry a little—we do not usually hear that, from the SNP Benches—but he then asked specifically about a no-deal scenario. In the annex to the paper we published in the summer, we outlined other ways to ensure the flow of data, and we do consider all options. There are alternative means of legal transfer of data, but we fully expect a good deal. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made the same point, but he stressed that this is about not just the future EU-UK relationship, but the UK’s relationships all around the world and our ability to get strong trading relationships underpinned by data that is protected with good cybersecurity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) argued powerfully that data protection must be based on trust—my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) made a similar point—and mentioned the advantage of future flexibility in a position in which Britain can lead across the world. He mentioned our history on that topic and the computer Manchester 1, which my mother worked on, and Stirling’s growing digital economy. He asked us to raise our eyes to the horizon and ensure that we get this right across the world.

Like the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling asked about the EU-US privacy shield and post-Brexit data flows. We of course want to maintain the current protections for UK citizens under the privacy shield after exit. We want to ensure that data flows between the UK and third countries with EU adequacy decisions, like the US, can continue on the same basis. That is part and parcel of what we are trying to achieve.

The hon. Member for Cambridge also asked about dialogue with the EU on the future partnerships paper, and that is ongoing. For example, the Secretary of State for Justice is at the Justice and Home Affairs Council this week and will be speaking about that paper, setting out in particular the argument that we are approaching Brexit from a point of harmonisation. Keeping the Data Protection Bill harmonised with the GDPR will be critical as we take the Bill through both Houses, and I am glad for the Opposition’s support in maintaining that position.
The right hon. Member for East Ham made a characteristically excellent speech. I hope he is not on the Bill Committee, and I mean that as a compliment. However, he was wrong about the loss of influence, and my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford, who was in the European Parliament at the time, pointed out just how influential both Labour and Conservative British MEPs were in ensuring that we got a good piece of GDPR legislation.

I want to make it absolutely clear that our goal is an agreement that builds on the existing model of adequacy. We are seeking an arrangement at least as strong as implied that we were moving off adequacy. We are not.

However, he was wrong about the loss of influence, and my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford is a happy place to live; I wonder whether he was in the European Parliament at the time, pointed out just how influential both Labour and Conservative British MEPs were in ensuring that we got a good piece of GDPR legislation.

Stephen Timms: Does the Minister recognise that the absence of article 8 will make his goal harder to achieve? He said that we can look elsewhere in the body of European law, and it is all terribly vague and badly defined. The problem is that that will not convince the Commission—and it is the Commission that he has to convince about adequacy.

Matt Hancock: I think the right hon. Gentleman is wrong on this point, which no doubt we will debate during the passage of the Bill. We know of no other jurisdiction with an adequacy deal that has been required to put the charter into law. Such a requirement has not been imposed anywhere else, so there is no reason for it in this case. The charter is a summary of laws present elsewhere and we are bringing the jurisprudence into UK law. Our goals are the same; in a sense, the question is a legal one. The fact that such a requirement has not existed in any other adequacy arrangements implies that the issue should not be problem for us, not least because of our strong legal basis for bringing GDPR into UK law.

On mail and direct marketing by post, I should like to correct the right hon. Gentleman slightly. Data controllers will need a legal basis for this under GDPR, but article 6 sets out a number of potential legal bases, not only consent. That does not change the reality on the ground from the current data protection arrangements. I hope that I have provided adequate reassurance.

The right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) raised article 8, as did others. I am clear about the strength of the assurance that I have given and I hope that Opposition Members accept it. When private businesses consider their future arrangements, I hope that Members on both sides will make clear our determination to get a deal that is as good as adequacy, if not better. We want people to continue to do business and thrive here in the UK.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford, whom I have mentioned a couple of times, made a powerful and informed speech. Of course we think that the passenger data transfer is important; the referendum does not change how important it is. The EU already has third country arrangements in place with others, so we see no reason why the issue cannot be fixed. I am also sure that Chelmsford is a happy place to live; I wonder whether that is down to my hon. Friend or her ebullient predecessor.

I also agree with my hon. Friend that we must be vigilant and not gold-plate the Data Protection Bill through Information Commissioner’s Office guidance. No doubt we will discuss that during the passage of the Bill. I have regular conversations with the ICO about exactly that issue. We want guidance to come out early. In some cases, the ICO is having to wait for guidance from the Commission and that causes the delay—it is not the fault of the Information Commissioner. But we do want guidance to be in clear, simple language, not gold-plated, and to come out as early as is reasonably practicable. I thank the Information Commissioner and all her team for her excellent work.

Darren Jones: The Minister says that the guidance should come out early, but it is already too late in respect of direct applicability of the general data protection regulation for many businesses, which may need to carry out major systems changes if guidance says something that they are not expecting based on interpretation of the article. Will he say to the ICO that, where guidance is late and that makes it harder for organisations to make those changes, there will be some leeway when it comes to enforcement?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman speaks like a true lawyer. The hon. Member for Cardiff West said that the hon. Gentleman had been outed as a lawyer during this debate—my goodness, he outs himself as a lawyer from the first moment he strikes his posture in this Chamber. He is obviously a lawyer and that latest point only proves it further. The ICO has already said that, and it is well worth reading the Information Commissioner’s Cambridge speech from a couple of months ago, which set out that reassurance. The hon. Gentleman asked about timing and complained about there not being an agreement already. We want to get on and discuss the future relationship, and the Government have made that clear; it is the European side that is blocking progress on to the future relationship. I hope that we can get on and discuss it forthwith.

Wera Hobhouse: As I have said, we have been in Brussels and heard time and again from different sides that it is up to the UK Government to break that deadlock. There are two issues where they are free to break it; this is particularly the case on the money issue, but Government Members do not want to face that, because even a penny to pay in compensation or in the divorce bill will not be good enough. That is why we are in deadlock and we cannot move on.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is wrong about that. She is also wrong to have said that there is no certainty about the future UK data protection arrangements, because there is and we are putting it into law: it will be the GDPR, plus the Data Protection Bill, which is before the other House. Although she was completely wrong, I am grateful for her intervention.

This has been a very productive debate and I am grateful for the largely very well-informed and detailed discussion, all of which has been good natured. I look forward to continuing this over the months ahead. There is a shared mission in this House to have a high-quality data agreement with the European Union to make sure we have high-quality data protection and the free flow of data. I hope I have given assurances...
about the actions we are taking to deliver that and to support the digital economy, through Brexit and beyond.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Exiting the European Union and Data Protection.

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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

4.47 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I wish to start by reading out a quote from journalist Frances Ryan:

“When the 'most vulnerable citizens' line is used by well-meaning voices, there's a secret second sentence that's rarely uttered: disabled people, truth be told, do not need to be vulnerable. Contrary to the myth sold by years of austerity, to be afraid, desperate or isolated is not a normal state of affairs for people with disabilities. Vulnerability comes when politicians choose to pull the support disabled people need in order to live dignified, fulfilling, independent lives—knowing full well the misery it will cause.”

The clarity of her writing is matched by the clarity of her thought.

We have failed people who have disabilities. Our attitude seems to be that disabled people only need to get up, and be washed, dressed and fed, and then nothing else matters—nothing about quality of life, social interaction, cultural activities or anything else that makes us human; just the basics of survival. Even there we are failing them. Leonard Cheshire last year produced research showing that half the disabled adults in the UK who need social care are living without any help at all, which is leaving them isolated, trapped at home, and unable to be part of society. That is our fault.

I will avoid reciting a list of cases of utter desperation involving people who come to my surgery on a regular basis, and I am sure every Member here can reel off, with little effort, a dozen cases that illustrate the damage to individuals caused by the Government’s policies, how austerity has stripped away dignity, and how an uncaring lead from Whitehall has left uncaring followers in its wake. I have no doubt—

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Deidre Brock: In a moment.

I have no doubt that the Minister could add to the lament were she so minded. This river of human misery should shame the Government and every legislator who stands in this Chamber, but it does not. Instead, the atmosphere of persecution creates fear and distrust, leaving people isolated and alone, which is a form of psychological damage that may be even more cruel than the physical damage.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): This week, we noted World Mental Health Day. One of the biggest contributors to stress and mental ill health is poverty and the desperation brought about by the changes my hon. Friend is describing.

Deidre Brock: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That is another thing about which we have heard just too much in our surgeries in recent years. Unfortunately, there is no sign of it ending. Two of the three disability premiums that were included under employment and support allowance are missing from universal credit, so severely disabled people could lose £78.35 per week—around £340 a month—from their income. Research carried out...
by the citizens advice bureau in East Lothian showed that disabled recipients of universal credit will lose up to a fifth of their income.

Against that background, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reported in August on the progress that the UK has made towards fulfilling its obligations under the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. It is fair to say that the committee was not complimentary to the UK Government. It praised the Scottish Government and gave some praise to the Welsh Government, but it did not feel able to say much in favour of the UK Government’s efforts. I really hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us that there will be better news in future reports.

The United Nations report criticised the austerity fetish, condemned the cuts to funding offered to people with disabilities for independent living and called on the Government to backtrack. The tally of the committee’s recommendations for the UK exceeded 80 and covered a huge range of areas in which we have simply failed to protect them and in which the Government have assaulted them. It is, as the chairperson of the UN committee said, a human catastrophe. The Government have totally neglected people with disabilities.

At the end of last year, the same UN committee said that UK Government policies and cuts amounted to systematic violations of the rights of people with disabilities. The Government’s response appears to have rested on saying that the committee misunderstood and that they were improving and building on the support available to disabled people. I hope that the Minister will offer us a little more than that today.

The Government have not acted on the previous report from the committee, so I hope we get some commitment to action on the most recent one. I am not asking for an answer to every point in the committee’s report—I am sure that a team of civil servants is already working on that and that responses will come in due course—but I would like an indication of whether the Minister and the Department intend to press ahead with addressing the concerns raised by the UN.

The UK is going backwards in respect of far too many critical rights for people with disabilities. The concluding observations in the committee’s report contained probably the highest number of recommendations from the committee for any state so far. I appreciate that it is a bit difficult to turn a Government around to point in a different direction, especially when so many senior members of that Government seem to have other things on their minds, but will the Minister give a commitment that she will at least work towards addressing all the committee’s recommendations? I hope that she will be able to give such a commitment and that she will apply some honest endeavour to get her colleagues in government to pay some attention to the issues. Will she give us that commitment that she will seek to address each and every one of the recommendations?

Will the Minister also give us a commitment that she will include deaf and disabled people’s organisations in the work to address the recommendations—and I mean fully, not just a quick consultation and then carrying on regardless? Will she have the DPPOs in the room, as part of the process and a fully functioning part of her efforts, as recommended by paragraph 53 of the report?
was time to go through all the recommendations, to address each and every one of the points, and to get to the bottom of each of the issues raised in the report. I feel, however, that there may be more benefit in allowing the Minister plenty of time to respond to the points that are being raised, and we can revisit the issues at a later date.

May I make a few final points to which I hope that the Minister will respond? These few are, I think, the most important of all and I would be grateful if the Minister gave them special attention. Paragraph 59 of the report calls for the Personal Independence Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2017 to be repealed. Will she commit the Government to that?

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her full and extensive contribution. Does she agree that the UN Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her full and extensive contribution. Does she agree that the UN report gave hope to many disabled people who felt that they were not being listened to and that, by not coming to the House to give a full statement, the Government have lost an opportunity to show that they are listening to the needs of disabled people?

Deidre Brock: As I said at the beginning of my speech, these situations are all too common to us all as constituency MPs. I hope that the Minister is listening closely to some of these examples and that she will take action.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her full and extensive contribution. Does she agree that the UN report gave hope to many disabled people who felt that they were not being listened to and that, by not coming to the House to give a full statement, the Government have lost an opportunity to show that they are listening to the needs of disabled people?

Deidre Brock: I absolutely agree. That was why I decided to apply for this debate. The report is very important and all its recommendations demand an answer from the Minister. Our time today is limited, but I hope that there will be an opportunity for more of the recommendations to be addressed.

Paragraph 59 of the report also calls for a cumulative impact assessment of all the changes to support for people with disabilities. That is very important, so will the Minister commit to doing that? The same paragraph calls for a review of the conditionality and sanction regimes and for the Government to tackle the negative consequences of those regimes. Will she commit to doing that? It also calls for a support framework that recognises the many additional costs that come with disabilities. Will she commit to putting that in place?

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Deidre Brock: I appreciate that the Minister is a member of a Government for which austerity has become a fixation, elevated to some high regard approaching a theology. Some of her ministerial colleagues have, at times, shown what can only be described as a callous disregard for the welfare of people with disabilities, but I am prepared to accept that she stands at the Dispatch Box in good faith. Will she undertake to Members of Parliament and, more importantly, to our constituents to seek a fair deal for people with disabilities—a deal that recognises the additional costs and strains on life that come with those disabilities? Can I tell constituents who have asked about this matter that the Minister with responsibility for their welfare is seeking to fulfil the obligations laid on her by the convention, and can I tell them that she wants them to be part of the process? What commitments will she give today?

5.1 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for securing the debate and colleagues who have contributed. She raised a number of points, largely on the domestic agenda, which I will go through in detail. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has also raised a number of issues in the wake of the report. All the issues raised by the commission and the hon. Lady are important and legitimate, and I will take them each in turn. I also want separately to address the UN process and why its credibility is so important, particularly to me personally, as the hon. Lady placed great weight on that and on me in her speech.

We are committed to the convention and to the progressive realisation of the rights for disabled people that it sets out. The UK supported the development of the convention and was one of the first countries to sign it and ratify it. We are one of the few nations that has also ratified the convention’s optional protocol, which allows individual complaints to be raised and permits the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to investigate alleged violations of the convention. For this reason, it would be quite wrong to conclude that time spent in scrutiny of a particular nation is an indication of its standing in the world on these matters. The fact is that we allow the UN to do this.

We enable our nation’s record to be examined and the full participation in that by civil society. That is a credit to the UK and an example that I hope other nations will follow. It is also a sign of our commitment to this agenda. To pretend otherwise undermines the UN’s processes and core aims, particularly those of promoting social progress and human rights. Globally, disabled people have often been the last to have those aims focused on them. They are the most discriminated against and face the greatest obstacles to reaching their full potential.

Dr Whitford: The Minister and I have previously discussed a case where a gentleman in my constituency with complex post-traumatic stress disorder was treated really quite poorly. One of the areas where people are really suffering is under PIP, and it is simply by design. Will she commit to looking at that? We talk about parity of esteem, but it does not exist in PIP.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and perhaps I can just digress to answer it. From memory, in the case that she raised on the Floor of the House, she alleged some unacceptable behaviour by one of our call assistants. In any case that any hon. Member raises with me, I will investigate fully. I obtained
a transcript of the conversation, and it was absolutely not the case that what was alleged to have occurred did. I do not in any way criticise the hon. Lady, because she had this third hand, and she was quite right to raise the concerns that she did. However, where hon. Members raise issues with me as the Minister or with any of the Department for Work and Pensions team, we will investigate them fully, and any unacceptable behaviour will be dealt with.

**Dr Whitford:** Does the Minister not recognise that, with the obsession with mobility, PIP does not recognise mental ill health? It gives far too much weight to those with a physical disability. Therefore, there simply is not parity of esteem.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will happily come to the mental health issue later, but, as hon. Members will be aware, PIP is a better benefit by quite a dramatic degree for those who have a mental health condition, when we look at the number of those with a mental health condition who are on the highest rates of the daily living and mobility components of PIP and compare that with DLA. Let me make some progress, but I will come back to mental health.

With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to set out briefly why this agenda and particularly the international agenda are so important to me. Twenty-six years ago, I worked in the hospitals and orphanages of post-revolutionary Romania, in what could only be described as medieval conditions. Most of the children in my care were disabled and all were neglected, to the point that some 14-year-olds were still being bottle-fed, half had HIV, and many had been deliberately infected and had had medicine withheld to hasten their end. Some 50% were babies with a 12% chance of making it to adulthood.

Two things stuck out for me from that experience. First, in that socialist republic, villagers who lived only a few hundred metres from those children had no caring thoughts towards them and could not understand why aid workers had come to assist them. Secondly, with the exception of the occasional visit from a healthcare professional from one of the Scandinavian nations, all the aid workers were British.

Today, I am part of a Government who, in their international aid efforts, have prioritised the 15% of the world’s population living with a disability. This agenda is the most under-prioritised and under-resourced in development. We want to establish the UK as a global leader in this field and to build on our experience and improve accessibility, employment and representation.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will happily come to the mental health issue later, but, as hon. Members will be aware, PIP is a better benefit by quite a dramatic degree for those who have a mental health condition, when we look at the number of those with a mental health condition who are on the highest rates of the daily living and mobility components of PIP and compare that with DLA. Let me make some progress, but I will come back to mental health.

As I turn to the domestic agenda, which the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith focused on, I want to emphasise that I am keen to promote what we are doing because it is a catalyst for change elsewhere in the world. We have shown what can be done to facilitate disabled access, both physical and service-based, and how that can be achieved in cooperation with business and the third sector. Our work promotes change elsewhere in the world, which is why we would like the UN to recognise what we have been doing.

We have already responded to many concerns raised by the UN committee that oversees the convention through our published written response and during a face-to-face dialogue with the committee, and that is the standard reporting process for all conventions. We were active in promoting the review process with civil society, and we were extremely pleased to note how engaged they were with this process. I will set out our long-term reporting plans shortly.

The immediate next step will be a response to correct some of the factual inaccuracies in the UN report. In line with the convention, disability is mainstreamed. Every Department is responsible for considering disability in the development and implementation of its policies. That responsibility is made clear through the legislative duties placed on all public bodies by the public sector equality duty in the Equality Act 2010 and the Northern Ireland Act 1998. As a general principle, we do not incorporate international treaties into domestic law. However, the UK Equality Act 2010 enshrines the right of people in Great Britain with any of nine protected characteristics to live free from discrimination, harassment or victimisation, and have equal opportunities in domestic law.

The UK has a long-standing tradition of ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically and of fulfilling our international obligations. The decision to leave the European Union does not change that: in fact, it affords us the opportunity to enhance that agenda. It is perhaps more important to focus on how the Equality Act and other legislation, such as the Care Act 2014, are enforced. Hon. Members will know that that has been a focus for the Office for Disability Issues under my tenure.

I turn to the issues raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith and by the EHRC, including the claim that some of the Equality Act provisions applicable to Great Britain are not in force. We take note of the concerns about those provisions and we regularly review the scope for introducing further provision, including the duty to make reasonable adjustments to common parts of rented properties, as the Minister for Equalities promised the Lords Equality Act 2010 and Disability Committee we would. We are looking at the implementation of the requirement for political parties to publish diversity data. We will report back to Parliament in due course on all those issues.

The EHRC also raised the issue of Northern Ireland currently providing weaker protection than other areas in the UK. The Northern Ireland Executive’s draft programme for Government 2016-21 includes a proposal to amend the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to increase statutory protection for disabled people, and
that remains subject to review and approval by future Ministers and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I hope that that will be progressed.

The EHRC also called for a co-ordinated, UK-wide action plan to implement the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which the hon. Lady also mentioned. The Office for Disability Issues is currently reflecting on how we take this work forward, and we are carefully considering our approach, which we will discuss with stakeholders in due course. I can give the hon. Lady assurances that I am keen to use the process that we go through with the UN to help to speed up progress on a range of issues. We will report on that in due course.

The UK has one of the strongest legislations in the world to protect the human rights of disabled people. Current OECD data puts the UK’s public spending on supporting disability above all G7 countries bar one. Disability benefits spending will be higher than in 2010 for every year until 2020 and is currently at a record high.

The hon. Lady raised concerns about PIP and mental health, in particular. We will respond shortly to Paul Gray’s second review of PIP. The House does not have long to wait before we publish that and, as part of that, we undertook to look in particular at mental health, in part because of the issues raised here and in the other place about those regulations. If she will bear with me, she will not have long to wait on that.

The Department has also undertaken work on conditionality and sanctions, initially looking at those with a mental health condition. We will make announcements on that shortly, but I am not able to do so this evening. We have also been recruiting to set up user rep panels for ESA and PIP. I very much agree with what the hon. Lady says about not just occasionally consulting, but embedding the opportunities for disabled people to shape, continually and in real time, improvements that we want to make to the welfare system and other areas, and to inform proactively any future reform that we may wish to undertake.

Last year, we launched “Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper” and the associated consultation. With more than 6,000 responses, we successfully sparked a national discussion on how better to support people with disabilities and health conditions to get into, stay in and progress through work. We are carefully considering the responses and our next steps for longer-term reform, which we will set out this autumn. Our goal is to get a million more disabled people into work, so that more talent is utilised and more people can reach their full potential.

I can tell the hon. Lady that there are no plans to amend minimum wage legislation. The employment rate for people with learning disabilities is less than 6%. Given the right vocational education and independent living support, that could rise to 86%. That is what we should be concentrating on if we want to assist those people into the workplace. Whether someone has a learning disability or not, if they work a day, they should be paid for a day.

The issues concerning deaf and hearing impaired people have been raised in a couple of interventions. The needs of those people have been a particular focus, especially in the health and work Green Paper. The issue of guide dogs and assistance dogs was raised. As it is Guide Dogs Week, the Office for Disability Issues has led a project working with all assistance dog charities with a view to reducing the waiting time that people may face to get one of those vital dogs and with the aim of agreeing a national standard to enable them to use their resources better.

In our work with the joint Health and Work Unit, we are looking at opportunities to ensure that disabled people’s organisations are at the heart of shaping, evaluating and setting the agenda for the kind of employment support we should be providing. Many of the things that we have been doing chime with what the hon. Lady has on her wish list.

The agenda is much wider than that, however. In February, my Department announced 11 new sector champions, who will help to tackle the issues faced by disabled people as consumers. These champions represent a range of sectors and business areas—from banking to aviation and from sport to retail. They are using their influence to drive improvements in accessibility and the quality of services and facilities within their sector. I pay tribute to them for their outstanding work.

Through initiatives run by the ODI, we are harnessing the power of technology, with new opportunities to enforce the Equality Act better and to improve accessibility. There is much more I could say about the work of the ODI and the Government on tackling hate crime; on building regulations and housing; on the provision of critical facilities, such as changing places and loos, on which we are in discussions with the Department for Communities and Local Government; on tackling the extra costs of disability; on changes to education and extending opportunity; and on the additional provisions of the Equality Act that are coming in and which we wish to bring into force.

As we develop our UN reporting process, I hope that further engagement on these issues will be possible with colleagues in this place and the other place. I hope that the UN will recognise not just the progress that the UK has made—and is making—and our ambitions on this agenda, but our humanitarian desire to help other nations to achieve more. I know the difference that the UK makes in many of the DFID-run projects that it has made—such as changing places and loos, as it did 26 years earlier in the former eastern bloc. The UN’s support is not a necessary condition for our success, but it would be welcome and helpful.

Question put and agreed to.

5.20 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 16 October 2017

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Neighbourhood Policing

1. Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential connection between crime levels and changes in the level of neighbourhood policing.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Crime as measured by the Crime Survey for England and Wales has continued to fall in recent years. That includes the period after 2010, when police forces played their part in tackling the deficit by operating within reduced budgets. Decisions on deployment are rightly made by chief constables, working with their democratically accountable police and crime commissioners to meet local needs.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Home Secretary was so excited that she neglected to mention that she was seeking to group question 1 with question 4—which is, of course, entirely orderly.

Amber Rudd: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

4. Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential connection between crime levels and changes in the level of neighbourhood policing.

Stephanie Peacock: A quarter of my local police forces’ operational strength has been cut since 2010. When I visited police in Barnsley this weekend, they told me that they were genuinely worried about how they would continue to operate at the same level if further cuts were made. Does the Home Secretary disagree with officers such as those in Barnsley who say that additional cuts will have a severe impact on neighbourhood policing?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Lady that there are no plans for further cuts, and that the police budget has been protected between 2015 and 2020. I have particular admiration for South Yorkshire police, who recently launched a new neighbourhood policing model that is moving significant resources in neighbourhood policing across the forces’ four districts. That shows exactly how well they are operating.

Holly Lynch: As the Home Secretary will know, one of the crimes that has increased is the carrying out of attacks on police officers themselves. May I therefore take this opportunity to welcome today’s news that the Government will support the “protect the protectors” Bill, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), on Friday?

That having been said, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary recently warned that “the position on crime prevention and local policing continues to deteriorate.” Does the Minister now accept that neighbourhood policing is at the very core of crime prevention, and that it is neighbourhood policing that has had to bear the lion’s share of the loss of 20,000 police officers across the country, much to the detriment of safety in our communities?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady has raised two points. On the first, I agree with her. I welcome the close working to protect the protectors, and we will continue to do that. As for the specific point about the hon. Lady’s local police force, it is good to see that West Yorkshire police is graded as “good” across all three strands, and that HM Inspector of Constabulary Mike Cunningham has said:

“I am very pleased with the overall performance of West Yorkshire Police.”

May that continue.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): If the Government are going to support the private Member’s Bill mentioned by the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), it is important that the Ministry of Justice and the Crown Prosecution Service play their part as well, and that, when the Sentencing Council suggests that judges give more severe sentences for assaults on police officers and other emergency workers, they do what it says on the tin.

Amber Rudd: Let me first congratulate my right hon. Friend, and secondly say how much I agree with him. That will not be a surprise, in view of his record in the Chamber on these issues. I will indeed convey his request to the CPS, and ensure that we deliver that.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): There is a worrying increase in crime in West Yorkshire, including in my constituency, and it is a fact that the police officers, who are doing a fantastic job, are overstretched. The Government’s first duty should be to protect the public and keep them safe. May I urge the Home Secretary to ensure that more resources go into West Yorkshire to support the police who are tackling that worrying rise in crime?

Amber Rudd: I agree with my hon. Friend that the first role of Governments is indeed to protect people; as the Conservative party in government, we will make sure that we do that at every step. I can tell my hon. Friend that the total cash funding for West Yorkshire in
2017-18 has increased by £3.7 million since 2015-16, and also that West Yorkshire has police resource reserves of £91 million.

Mr Speaker: I understand that the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead is to become a knight of the realm. I had not been aware of that important fact, but I am now, and I warmly congratulate the right hon. Gentleman, who is evidently absolutely delighted with the status to be conferred upon him.

On the matter of knights, I call Sir Edward Davey.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston upon Thames) (LD): Given that the Met police are issuing guidelines that some so-called low-level crime will no longer be investigated in London, is it not now crystal clear that Government cuts in community policing are helping criminals and hurting victims? Will the Home Secretary now tell the House that she is campaigning in the Government for a big rise in police funding in the forthcoming Budget?

Amber Rudd: Let me respectfully observe to the right hon. Gentleman that, having spoken to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner very recently, I know that there is no change in the operating model of the Metropolitan police. They will continue to triage crimes as they arrive in the appropriate way, to ensure that they always prioritise the most important. Conservative Members will always be on the side of the victims, and will always ensure that the police have the right resources to address crime.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire has 1,242 police officers, 488 specials, 860 police staff and 95 police community support officers. Will the Home Secretary congratulate Northamptonshire police on starting a drive to recruit even more police officers this year?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and will of course join him in congratulating Northamptonshire police. I should add that his force is not the only one increasing recruitment and the number of crimes it is solving. Sometimes, listening to Opposition Members, one could think that the police were not doing the fantastic duty that they are; I urge Opposition Members to take the time sometimes to congratulate them on the phenomenal job they do.

Residency Rights (EU Nationals)

2. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What her policy is on the residency rights of EU nationals (a) during any transitional phase and (b) after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The Prime Minister was clear in her Florence speech in September that people will continue to be able to come to, and live and work in, the UK. There will be a registration system—an essential preparation for the new immigration system required to retake control of our borders—and we will be setting out initial proposals for the implementation period in due course, and for our new immigration system later in the year.

Hannah Bardell: I have encountered numerous cases where documents supplied to the Home Office by EU nationals have been misplaced or permanently lost. Does the Minister think it fair or reasonable to expect people to endure the financial cost of replacing these documents for the Home Office? What assurances can he give that this issue will be addressed, especially given the chaos that is about to ensue as we leave the EU?

Brandon Lewis: We are clear that we want to work with our partners in Europe to have a smooth and good system for EU citizens here to go through as they gain settled status as part of the fair and very serious proposal we made, and I am confident that we will be able to deliver that in a simple and clean system for them. Obviously, if the hon. Lady has particular cases that she feels we need to look at, I encourage her to write to me and I will happily look at them.

 Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, another knight popping up—or perhaps I should say “ languidly rising.” I call Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): There has been a lot of reportage and worry in this country about the number of EU nationals coming here perfectly legally. I am much more worried about what the Home Affairs Committee was told last week by David Wood, former head of immigration: there are 1 million illegals here, which the Home Office knows nothing about. Will the Minister’s Department focus on fast-tracking our friends and relations who are here legally from the EU so it can concentrate on the illegals?

Brandon Lewis: We are very much focused on dealing with people who are here illegally; that is what the compliant environment work is all about. Obviously our friends and partners and citizens from the EU are, under free movement, here entirely legally. I encourage them to remain, as we value what they do for our society and economy, and we will remain focused on dealing with the illegal immigrants, who should be in their home countries.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish Government have said that they will meet the fee for settled status applications of EU citizens working in the public sector in Scotland, in order to keep vital workers in the NHS and other public services and to make it clear that we want them to stay because we welcome them. Will the United Kingdom Government match that promise—or, better still, waive the fee entirely?

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate the comment that the hon. and learned Lady has made, and will certainly feed that through. Obviously, we are in negotiations at the moment; when they end, we will know exactly what the system will be.

Joanna Cherry: Scotland does not want to lose the benefit of freedom of movement. Yesterday the Unison trade union said that immigration must be devolved to Scotland after Brexit or else there would be a population crisis. In saying that, Unison is joining with business in Scotland, including the Chambers of Commerce and...
the Institute of Directors, who have said that they want a separate deal for immigration in Scotland. With this wide support from civic society for the devolution of at least some immigration to Scotland, what will it take for the Minister’s Department to give these calls the serious consideration that they deserve?

Brandon Lewis: We have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee, who are going to be looking at the impact of European workers on our economies. We are clear that we value their input both in society to our communities and to our economy. We want EU citizens to stay and will be encouraging them to do so, as the Prime Minister and Home Secretary have done on numerous occasions.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that we cannot move on to trade talks with EU negotiators until we have resolved the questions of the Irish border, the financial settlement and EU citizens’ rights. When will Ministers accept that the Government’s current proposals on EU citizens’ rights post-Brexit fall short because, among other things, EU citizens will not have the same right to bring in family members that they currently enjoy?

Brandon Lewis: Negotiations are progressing well. We are clear that, as our offer outlines, when we leave the European Union we will ensure that European citizens in this country have the same rights as British citizens. I am just disappointed that the right hon. Lady is not as focused on the rights of British citizens, both here and abroad.

Refugee Family Reunions

3. Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Whether her Department is taking steps to broaden the criteria under which refugee family reunions are permitted.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The family reunion policy allows immediate family members of those granted protection in the UK to reunite with them here. In addition, the family provisions in the immigration rules also provide for relatives with protection in the UK to sponsor children when there are serious and compelling circumstances. Our policy is clear: where an application fails under the rules, we consider whether there are exceptional reasons to grant leave outside the rules.

Layla Moran: As the Minister will be aware, a lone child refugee is currently unable to sponsor even their parents or siblings to join them in safety here. UNICEF and the Refugee Council have both said that the rules are too restrictive, and the Home Affairs Committee has called the situation “pervasive”. Will the Government therefore support the Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill, introduced in the other place by my colleague Baroness Hamwee, and allow these vulnerable children a chance to have the loving upbringing that every child surely deserves?

Brandon Lewis: We are working with the UNHCR and with UNICEF on this issue, and we want to ensure that the application of these rules and this policy works in practice. I ask the hon. Lady to look again at the rules that I have outlined, because we can consider whether there are exceptional reasons to grant leave outside the rules.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister will know that it is around 12 months since the Calais jungle was cleared, and Britain did its bit through the Dublin and the Dubs schemes to take some unaccompanied child and teenage refugees. Will he confirm, however, that since then no further child or teenage refugees have come to this country under the Dubs scheme and, in particular, that there have been none from Italy or Greece? Will he accept that the Home Office has designed the scheme in a way that is too restrictive and that makes it too difficult for Italy and Greece to send children here, despite the fact that there are still 280 pledged local authority places that remain unfilled? Will he now agree to revise the scheme to ensure that those 280 places can be filled before Christmas?

Brandon Lewis: We are working with other countries, which have their own national sovereignty. I was in Italy and Greece over the summer to talk about these programmes, and we are working with the Greek and French authorities to ensure that more children can come over and that we fulfil our duty. Let us bear in mind that when we get to the 480, the United Kingdom will have done more than other European countries, and we should be proud of that.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the Minister also look at the distribution of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children? About a quarter of the total are in Kent, but you won’t find many in the metropolitan borough of Wakefield.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. His county council in Kent is doing some fantastic work, and there are councils around the country making offers to do similar work. It would be good to see more councils coming forward to do that work, and I will be speaking to the Local Government Association this week about that very issue.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): My private Member’s Bill, the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, will have its Second Reading on 16 March. It is important for families to be united, especially when they need to travel together. I have a 14-year-old constituent who was born and raised in the Hebrides. Unfortunately, her father has died and her mother has not been seen for about 12 years, as I am sure the Home Office knows. Crucially, the mother’s birth certificate cannot be found. The upshot is that the UK Government refuse to give my constituent a passport. She needs a status letter, please. It is beyond any doubt that this girl is a Hebridean Scot. In the words of the Home Office, “On the balance of probabilities, the girl is a British national”. Will the Home Office now give my constituent and her grandparents that status letter, so that she can get her passport? Anything less would create tremendous difficulties, as I am sure the Minister knows.

Brandon Lewis: I am aware of that case and saw the hon. Gentleman’s social media output over the weekend, so I will write to him with some details. When we issue passports, we have to ensure that we go through all the
Motorcycle and Moped-enabled Crime

5. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What steps her Department plans to take to reduce the incidence of moped and motorcycle-enabled crime.

Amber Rudd: We recently brought together motorcycle insurance industry leaders, law enforcement partners, the Local Government Association, charities and representatives from the motorcycle-riding community to have a full and open discussion about the issue. All parties agreed to work together to devise a comprehensive action plan to tackle this type of crime. As a first step, we have announced a review to have a full and open discussion about the issue. All representatives from the motorcycle-riding community, the Local Government Association, charities and insurance industry leaders, law enforcement partners, parties agreed to work together to devise a comprehensive action plan to tackle this type of crime.

Mr Speaker: That was not requested, but I am, as usual, in a generous and benevolent mood.

19. Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce motorcycle and moped crime.

Amber Rudd: We recently brought together motorcycle insurance industry leaders, law enforcement partners, the Local Government Association, charities and representatives from the motorcycle-riding community to have a full and open discussion about the issue. All parties agreed to work together to devise a comprehensive action plan to tackle this type of crime. As a first step, we have announced a review of the law, guidance and practice surrounding police pursuits and response driving.

Mr Speaker: Order. I wanted to respond favourably partly for the benefit of the Home Secretary and her illustrious office and partly because the temptation to hear the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) is overwhelming.

Neil Coyle: Of 20,000 moped-related crimes in London last year, 752 happened in Southwark, but only 17 people were charged with an offence. Instead of tackling the rising problem, the Government have announced a review. What are the terms of this pantheistic response to this blight on my constituents’ lives? When will it be completed? What specific additional resources and powers will it give our overstretched and underfunded police?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we do not have operational control over what goes on in his constituency; what we do have is the ability to pull people together to get the right answers. This sort of evolving criminal activity needs to be dealt with by bringing people together to find out the best way to address it. We need to be guided by the police and local authorities. I urge him to engage with that consultation so that we get the right answers for his constituents.

Robert Neill: In the course of the Home Secretary’s welcome review, will she undertake to get the message out that pretty cynical and street-hardened young people, such as some in my constituency, are taking off their helmets when the police appear on the scene because they believe that the police will not chase them under the current guidelines? The guidelines are utterly out of touch with reality and frustrate police officers who are trying to do their job. Will the review look at that specific issue?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point in his particularly distinct way. He is absolutely right—he has put his finger on it—that the police do have a concern and we are having the review to address that concern. I hope that I will be able to come back to him with some progress soon.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Over the past six months, 35 motor vehicle thefts and a rise in moped-related crime have been reported in Penge. Yesterday, it was reported that an acid attack occurred in broad daylight. Many of my constituents are becoming increasingly concerned. What exactly is the Department doing to combat such crimes?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady’s concerns. We take this matter seriously and we must address it, particularly because such crimes tend to evolve and can hold a fashionable attraction for different communities. That is why we are having this review. That is why we are bringing together the different parties, and I urge her to engage with the process.

Asset Recovery Programme

6. Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): What steps she is taking to confiscate money from criminals; and how she plans further to strengthen the asset recovery programme.

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): Since 2010, we have recovered £1.4 billion under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. The Criminal Finances Act 2017 provides important new powers to improve the asset recovery system, such as unexplained wealth orders and the forfeiture of bank accounts. The Government are also implementing the recommendations of a 2016 Public Accounts Committee report, and our asset recovery action plan will be published by the end of the calendar year.

Victoria Atkins: Serious criminals view prison as an occupational hazard, but they do not like it when law enforcement hits them in the wallet and goes after their illegally obtained assets. Will my right hon. Friend assure me and the House that the National Crime Agency will use the exciting new powers, including unexplained wealth orders, that it has been given?

Mr Wallace: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are determined that unexplained wealth orders should be used not only by the NCA but by broader law enforcement to ensure that people have to prove where they got their wealth. Using that reverse burden of proof makes sure that we progress to taking an asset if a criminal’s wealth is unexplained and might have resulted from criminality.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that we regard the National Crime Agency as a bunch of amateurs in this field? People are increasingly talking about a big Russian mafia presence...
in London that is spending huge fortunes on organising crime. When will he take those people seriously and do something about them?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know—it might make him a bit happier—that that is why unexplained wealth orders, when applied to people outside the European economic area, have a lower burden of proof in court, so that we can freeze their assets and ensure that such people prove where they got their billions. We can then take the money and redistribute it back to the people who need it, either the law enforcement agencies or back to the countries from which they might have stolen it.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Can the Minister assure me that we will retain the European arrest warrant, retain co-operation with other European police forces and use all the powers we have in Europe, as well as in the United Kingdom, to bring such assets to justice?

Mr Wallace: I totally agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is exactly our goal to keep all those measures, but there is another party on the other side of the negotiating table. We would like to keep those measures, and we will ask for that—perhaps he could ask them, too—and let us hope they give it to us.

Police Funding

7. Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of police funding.

[901142]

9. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of police funding.

[901144]

14. Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of police funding.

[901150]

17. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of police funding.

[901153]

23. Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the 2015 funding settlement for police authorities. [901159]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Mr Speaker, I may be testing your legendary benevolence to the limit by seeking to group Question 7 with Questions 9, 14, 17 and 23.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has slipped in Question 23, which was not part of the original request. That should not be the normal practice, but on this occasion, notwithstanding a certain amount of twitching by the learned souls who advise me, I am inclined to try to be helpful.

Mr Hurd: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. The twitches are noted for future occasions.

In 2017, the taxpayer will invest more than £11 billion in our police system, an increase of more than £114 million on 2015. However, we recognise that demand on the police is changing, and we are very sensitive to the pressure they are under. That is why we are reviewing demand and resilience, and we will consult on plans for the 2018-19 settlement before the end of the year.

Mary Glindon: With direct resource funding amounting to a budget cut due to inflation and with the chief constable stating that the force is getting very near to not being able to deliver a professional service, how can the Minister guarantee to keep people across Northumbria safe?

Mr Hurd: I had a productive meeting with the chief constable and Commissioner Baird, and I have a good understanding of some of the policing challenges they face and of the historic ratio of precept funding to core grant funding. All I will say is that, as with every single force, we are reviewing the demands on Northumbria police and its resilience before we make decisions on the 2018-19 funding settlement, on which we will consult before the end of the year.

Paula Sherriff: The chief constable of West Yorkshire police said, “Our officers are exhausted” and that policing is “not sustainable” in the long term without an uplift in funding. We have lost more than 1,000 officers in West Yorkshire, yet this weekend Ministers briefed the press that there is room for more cuts. If the Government’s first duty is the safety of their citizens, how can they possibly justify more cuts in the face of such warnings?

Mr Hurd: We are not cutting. As I have made clear, the amount of taxpayers’ money going into the police system has gone up and individual police budgets are flat. The amount of funding for West Yorkshire police rose in 2015-16 by £3.7 million, and the force is sitting on £91 million of reserves, some 22% of revenue.

Julie Cooper: Since January 2017, policing the anti-fracking protest in Lancashire has cost Lancashire constabulary close to £4 million. Given that 78% of the protestors are not from Lancashire, when will the Government step in to meet those costs? It cannot be right for the council tax payers of Lancashire to bear the burden of what is essentially a national protest.

Mr Hurd: I understand the hon. Lady’s point. I am sure she is aware that we have a special grant pot, from which police forces can bid to cover significant, unexpected costs. A number of forces, including Lancashire, have put in bids to cover the costs of fracking protests. That is under review.

Helen Hayes: Last month, my constituent Jude Gayle, a young father, was stabbed to death as he returned home—yet another tragic and senseless loss in a growing number of knife attacks, which are up 20% in London over the past year. Will the Home Secretary finally accept that cutting hundreds of millions of pounds from the Metropolitan police budget since 2010 is a reckless approach to the safety and security of Londoners?

Mr Hurd: We have not, and I do not necessarily think there is any link between a reduction in police numbers and the outcome in terms of the complex drivers of the crime that the hon. Lady mentioned. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member...
for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) is totally on top of this in terms of new legislation to ban the sale of zombie knives, for example. What I say, as a London MP, is that the budget for the Met is under review, as is that of every other force in the country, ahead of the 2018-19 funding settlement.

**Tracy Brabin:** “With officer numbers at 1985 levels, crime up 10% in the last year and police work becoming ever more complex, this additional pressure is not sustainable.

The current flat cash settlement for forces announced in 2015 is no longer enough.” Those were the words of Britain’s most senior police chief. Which part of that does the Minister disagree with?

**Mr Hurd:** The hon. Lady will know, because her shadow Minister put it on the record last time, that police budgets have been protected in the round—that is the reality—but we recognise that demand on the police is changing. I echo the Home Secretary’s words: we are absolutely determined to make sure that the police have the resources they need to do the job properly, while continuing to support and challenge them to be more efficient and effective.

**James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): Wiltshire police force’s investigation into the pretty flimsy allegations against Sir Edward Heath—a matter to which I hope to return in topical questions, if I am lucky enough to catch your eye. Mr Speaker—has cost between £1.5 million and £2 million, depending on whom one listens to. Most of us think that is an idiotic waste of money. I am grateful to the Home Office for agreeing to pay £1.1 million of that, thereby relieving my constituents in terms of their council tax obligations, but if this is a national matter, why is the Home Office paying only £1.1 million and not the whole thing?

**Mr Hurd:** I understand the strength of feeling from my hon. Friend on this matter. I can assure him that applications for grants and support for this inquiry went through all the normal processes, with the appropriate checks and balances on this.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Essex’s police service is doing an amazing job, but it is the second lowest funded in the country and our local policing precept is also very low. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Essex police on the job they do? Will he also be prepared to meet Essex MPs to discuss the possibility of increasing the local funding contribution, without the cost of a referendum?

**Mr Hurd:** I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I join her in celebrating the success of Essex police. I have received representations from the Essex police and crime commissioner—now also the fire commissioner—and other commissioners about flexibility on precept funding, and that is all part of the analysis we are doing as we look to the settlement for next year. Of course, I would be delighted to meet Essex Members of Parliament.

**Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): Antisocial behaviour and so-called low-level crime are a blight on Mansfield’s town centre, limiting investment and regeneration. Opposition Members are always keen to talk about budgets, which we know have risen, but it is not enough to throw money at a problem without having a plan. Will the Minister therefore tell me what proposals might come forward to try new methods of policing issues such as antisocial behaviour?

**Mr Hurd:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I understand that antisocial behaviour, particularly in town centres, is a blight, not least on the economy. I think three things need to happen: the Government need to make sure local police forces have the resources they need; the local commissioner and the chief have to make sure they have a smart system for allocating resources to demand and local priorities; and the police have to be very smart in how they work in partnership with local agencies and local businesses to work together to confront those issues, which is exactly what I saw recently in Newcastle.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Minister will be aware of proposals to merge Devon and Cornwall police with the Dorset police force. Will he reassure me that if that merger goes ahead, there will be no loss in funding and the funding for the new combined force will be at least equal to that which the two separate forces currently enjoy?

**Mr Hurd:** I understand the point my hon. Friend is making on behalf of Cornwall. I have received representations on this potential merger, but there is no question of our imposing it; it has come out of the system and we will look at it, carefully examining the business case and indications of support from both parts involved in any merger, particularly Cornwall.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The policing of shale gas protests in Kirby Misperton in my constituency is putting pressure on the local government, but many of the protestors are connected to national campaigns. Will the Minister agree to a meeting with me and the police and crime commissioner, so that we can make our case on why the costs should be met with national funds rather than by local taxpayers?

**Mr Hurd:** The short answer is yes.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): We know the pressures on police resources from a rise in violent crime, a huge increase in 999 and 101 calls, an unprecedented terrorist threat and a surge in non-crime demand because of mental health issues and missing persons. The police simply do not have the resources to respond to every report of crime. Were the Minister’s house burgled, how would he feel if the police did not show up?

**Mr Hurd:** I would feel frustrated and angry, as anyone else would. Government Members totally recognise the pressure that the police are under; in fact, I am currently concluding a process of speaking to or visiting every single police force in England and Wales, so I do not need any lectures on how pressured and stretched the police system is. We are listening and that is feeding into the work we are doing ahead of the consultation on the 2018-19 funding settlement. We are determined to make
sure that the police have the resources they need to do the job, while we also continue to challenge them to be efficient and effective.

International Students

8. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What her policy is on the number of international students who are admitted to the UK.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The Government are working hard to continue to attract international students to study here in the UK. There is no limit on the number of genuine international students that educational institutions in the UK can recruit; nor do we intend to change that position.

Chris Law: I have the honour of representing in my constituency two universities, Abertay University and University of Dundee, with a large intake of international students. Does the Minister agree that the Government’s confused approach to international students, based on information, will damage Scotland’s reputation as a world-leading destination for study?

Brandon Lewis: The short answer is no. The hon. Gentleman might be a bit confused, because we have been clear all the way through that we want good, genuine international students here at good, genuine institutions. The Government should take great credit for shutting down bogus colleges, so that when students come here they know that they are going to a good, strong institution. They play an important part in our economy, and we encourage that to continue.

24. [901160] Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): When international students come to the UK, what fees are they charged, and does the Department make a profit? The charge in a case of indefinite leave to remain is £2,297, but the cost to the Home Office is just £252. What kind of a racket is being run at the Home Office?

Brandon Lewis: I am happy to remind the hon. Gentleman that we set immigration and nationality fees at a level that ensures that the income received contributes towards the resources that are necessary for the wider border, immigration and nationality system, and in line with the charging powers approved by Parliament that are set out in the Immigration Act 2014, which he may have forgotten.

Mr BenBradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What contingency (a) funding and (b) planning her Department has for new customs check-points and other border facilities in the event that negotiations with the EU do not result in a deal.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): We are confident that a positive deal can be reached, but we are of course preparing for every outcome. Although we cannot comment on the detailed planning, Departments are working together across a range of complex issues to develop our future approach to the border, including for a possible no-deal scenario. Those options will be subject to the outcome of our negotiations with our partners in the EU.

Mr Bradshaw: The Minister’s former immigration director, David Wood, said last week that, with current resources, the challenge of Brexit “can’t be met”, and that is with a minimum two-year transition, let alone the chaos of a no-deal scenario. Given all the other demands on his budget that we have heard about today, is it not grossly irresponsible for some of his Cabinet colleagues to be running around talking up the prospects of a no deal, instead of being level with the public about any trade-offs that will inevitably result in a Brexit deal?

Brandon Lewis: I am optimistic that we will get a good deal both for the UK and for our partners in Europe, so that we can work together as forward-looking partners, but we are also actively monitoring work flows at the border to ensure that we have sufficient resources in place to meet demand. As my colleagues across the Government and in the Cabinet have said, it is absolutely right that we do plan for all eventualities.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister is, as always, a happy and optimistic chap, but, obviously, we must plan for a no-deal situation. The only thing that disturbed me was that the Government seem to want it kept in secret. Would it not be nice if it was shared with the whole House, so that British business and other people would know what a no-deal situation looked like?

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s comments about my demeanour, and I will always try to remain optimistic and happy about the fact that we are focused on ensuring that we keep our borders secure and that we are ready for any outcome at the end of the negotiations.
Brandon Lewis: I can confirm that. As the Prime Minister has outlined, we are very determined to ensure that we continue with the common travel area as is in place across the country and with Ireland.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Watching the faces on the Front Bench, we see the sensible wing of the Conservative party too frightened, rightly, to say what a no-deal Brexit would look like. May I urge the Minister to talk to the “fun boy three”—the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Secretary of State for International Trade—and leave them in no doubt about the strength of feeling among Opposition Members of the need properly to prepare for all eventualities and to plan for a deal with our European colleagues?

Brandon Lewis: I am absolutely astonished that the hon. Lady has asked that question, bearing in mind the prominence long before her time.

Mr Speaker: I am rather surprised that the hon. Lady remembers Fun Boy Three, as they came into great prominence long before her time.

Knife Crime

11. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps is she taking to reduce knife crime. [901146]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): We all recognise the importance of dealing with knife crime, given the terrible impact that it can have on people’s minds. Our work to tackle it is centred on working on four key strands: on police and enforcement; on retailers and responsible sales; on the legislative framework; and on early intervention.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Home Secretary for that reply. Does she agree that, one of the challenges here is that some of the most lethal knives are actually in people’s kitchens up and down the land, which makes them very difficult to regulate. On sentencing criminals, will she tell the House how many have been convicted under the so-called Nick de Bois amendment of “two strikes and you’re out”?

Amber Rudd: I share my hon. Friend’s concerns. That was exactly the right amendment and we need to ensure that it is enforced. I have also taken up the matter further with Nick de Bois, a former Member here, to see how we can implement it. He also drew attention to the importance of our £500,000 community fund, which enables local organisations to work with the community on early intervention to stop people picking up knives in the first place. That is available now, and I urge Members on both sides of the House to consider inviting local community organisations to apply for the fund.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Today was the first evidence session for the Youth Violence Commission, and we looked specifically at the role of youth and community work. Does the Secretary of State agree that early intervention is important in tackling knife crime and what would she say to those calling for a statutory youth service that is fully funded?

Amber Rudd: I certainly agree that early intervention is critical. My conversations with chief constables and colleges led to that. We need to do more to ensure that young people realise the consequence of carrying knives, as well as the terrible impact it can have on them if they are seen to be carrying one. That is why we have introduced the community fund, for which I urge the hon. Lady and other hon. Members to consider applying.

Study Visas

12. Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): What proportion of international students in the UK have been found to have overstayed their study visa. [901148]

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): Exit check analysis shows that 97% of students whose visas expired in 2016-17 were recorded as having left in time. That is good evidence that our reforms, from 2010 onwards, to tackle abuse in the education sector have worked.

Jo Stevens: If or, as seems likely, when Britain crashes out of the EU with no deal, what will happen at the point of exit to international students here on the Erasmus+ programme, many of whom are in my constituency of Cardiff Central?

Brandon Lewis: As I said earlier, there is no limit on the number of students. I am not going to predict the outcome post our negotiations but, as I have said to other colleagues, we are working to get a good deal for the United Kingdom and our partners in Europe.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Applications for international students and other immigration applications cost hundreds of pounds, and errors are common. When the Home Office makes such errors, it puts constituents and citizens in unnecessary distress, but there are no consequences for the Department getting critical decisions wrong time and again. Will the Minister explain where the profits from visa and other visa-related applications are going and how much of the fees received pay for these services? What will he do to improve such a terrible service?

Mr Speaker: That was an extremely scholarly academic inquiry to which an extremely pithy response is required—not beyond the competence of a graduate of the University of Buckingham in my constituency, I feel sure.

Brandon Lewis: I will do my best to rise to the challenge. Mr Speaker. As I said earlier, the immigration system’s visas and charges are as per the Immigration Act 2014. I would challenge the hon. Member for Manchester,
Gorton (Afzal Khan) a little bit because no one has come to me about mistakes in how we deal with student visas. We are encouraging students from all over the world to come here.

Online Radicalisation

13. Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps she is taking to safeguard vulnerable people from online radicalisation.

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government have been clear that there should be no safe space online for terrorists and their supporters to radicalise, recruit, incite or inspire. We are working closely with the industry, including through the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, to encourage it to develop innovative solutions to tackle online radicalisation.

Wendy Morton: Does the Minister agree that some of the world’s leading internet companies could do more to ensure that the propaganda emanating from Daesh and others is taken down immediately and not allowed to poison not just vulnerable individuals, but young minds?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right. Internet companies could do more with their technology. They could do much more to recognise that they have a responsibility for much of the stuff that is hosted on their sites and they could do more to take it down. That is why the United Kingdom Government, through the Global Internet Forum, are taking the lead in dealing with the issue. The Home Secretary was only recently in Silicon Valley, talking to those companies and trying to put further pressure on them to use their profits and vast wealth actually to do something about it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): As part of the Government’s strategy for online safety, they are seeking to ensure that all those suppliers bidding for information-sensitive contracts are certified under their Cyber Essentials scheme. Yet the Government have admitted to me in a written answer that they do not even bother to count the number of suppliers signed up to that scheme. In those circumstances, how can the Government ever look at and consider the success of their policy?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman misses the point. The authority placing the contract will, of course, verify the conditions of the contract before signing it. Whether we put it together and say, “We’ve got 1,000”, is slightly the second point. The main issue is whether it is properly done. On top of that, the UK Government as a whole invest £1.9 billion into the national cyber-security strategy to ensure that we deal with threats against our companies and individuals.

Rural Crime

15. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle rural crime.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): The Government have ensured that, through the election of police and crime commissioners, communities—including those in rural areas—have a strong voice in determining how police resources are allocated, to tackle the crimes that most matter to them. I hope that my hon. Friend will join me in congratulating Katy Bourne on her work to prioritise rural crime in Sussex.

Huw Merriman: I certainly congratulate Katy Bourne, who does a great job. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to ensure that the police investigate all crimes and not give a perception that certain offences, particularly those prevalent in rural areas, will not be pursued?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Of course, police will investigate all crimes. Extremely good police and crime commissioners who work with their communities, such as Katy Bourne, are able to prioritise what matters most to people. They often work in partnership with great organisations such as the National Farmers Union to come up with the right solutions for the community.

UK Visas and Immigration


The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The Home Office deals with millions of visa, citizenship, passport and immigration status applications each year. In the past year, UKVI has received more than 3.5 million applications, and more than 98.5% of major application routes, including for non-settlement, EU applications and asylum, have all been decided within their service standards. Some 99% of straightforward non-settlement applications were processed within 15 days last year.

Daniel Zeichner: I have a number of constituents who have family members who have applied for visas, submitted their passports and then endured very long delays—in some cases of many months—without their passports, so in effect they are trapped, unable to travel. What is UKVI going to do about those cases?

Brandon Lewis: Reviewing identity documents such as passports as part of an application is obviously an important part of maintaining a robust immigration system. Travel documents are retained for the duration of the decision-making process, but if the applicant wishes to travel while the application is being considered, dependent on the route through which they have applied, we will of course return their passport to them. If the applicant needs a passport for ID purposes, we can send certified copies that they are able to use.

Topical Questions

T1. [901101] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I wish to update the House briefly on the Government’s decision to launch a consultation on new laws on corrosive substances, knives and guns. All forms of violent crime are completely unacceptable and devastate lives, families and communities. That is why I have launched a consultation on offensive and dangerous weapons,
with proposals to ban the sale of the most harmful corrosive substances to under-18s, and to introduce minimum prison sentences for those who repeatedly carry corrosives without good reason. The consultation also includes new measures to prevent under-18s from getting around age restrictions by buying knives online, and proposals to ban offensive weapons such as zombie knives from being kept privately.

I want to send a powerful message that the cowards who burn with acid or cut with knives will not escape the full force of the law. I am clear that, by threatening someone with a knife or by plotting an acid attack, the only life you will be ruining is your own.

John Mann: Zombies are running wild in our communities. Sometimes those zombies are naked, their minds addled by a psychoactive street substance called Mamba. When will this House have a vote on making the possession of Mamba illegal?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about Mamba and the growth of other elements of drugs. That is why we have introduced a new drugs strategy, to try to help people exit. It involves making sure that local authorities work closely with police, housing and other stakeholder support areas. It is not just about banning, which is important, but about helping people to get off it and to get out and start to live their lives without it.

Amber Rudd: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the principle of having continued access to these databases is important for making sure that we keep people safe—people in the UK and people in the EU. As regards what sort of jurisdiction there is with oversight on the final arrangement, we are hoping to have a treaty that are already in place. There are different arrangements with Norway, Switzerland, America, and Europol. We will have a creative and, I hope, positive approach to delivering on that.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): My hon. Friend makes a good point. As I outlined earlier, we are preparing for all eventualities. We have published our offer for EU citizens. We will publish a White Paper later this year outlining our views about a future immigration system. We have also been very clear, in terms of citizens and flow, that we do not want to have a cliff edge. We want to make sure that businesses and the economy across this country can continue to access the labour they need as we move to a new immigration system.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). I will be delighted to sit down with Essex MPs to discuss this. As I said, a number of commissioners have approached us in similar vein, and it is part of our thinking as we look ahead towards the 2018-19 settlement.

Robert Courts: While I am optimistic that the Government’s negotiation will in due course produce a wide-ranging deal with the EU, in the event of no deal, what thought has the Home Secretary given to ensuring the free flow of people, where desired, across borders, but also controlling them for the purposes of security?
and dangerous gay cure therapies, which involve rituals and starvation as a cure for homosexuality. What assessment has the Minister made of such therapies in relation to LGBT hate crime? Will she take forward previous efforts to have an outright ban on such therapies, which have no place in 21st-century Britain?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. It is very sad to hear what is happening in his constituency. I would welcome him coming to the Home Office and providing me with more detail. One would really hope that in the 21st century such homophobic activity was consigned to the history books. Let me be absolutely clear: there is no place in our society for hate crime. In our hate crime action plan, we have very, very strong laws against those committing homophobic hate crime. I hope that his constituents will not hesitate to use these powers.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Following a spate of vehicle thefts in my constituency, would my right hon. Friend take action to ban the online sale of devices that are helping criminals to steal high-value vehicles by bypassing security coding and reprogramming onboard computer systems?

Mr Hurd: Vehicle theft is a horrible crime. It is at historic lows, but we are seeing spikes in some areas and we know that the methods used by criminals are constantly evolving. I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are not complacent at all and we are working very closely with industry to make sure we stay ahead of the criminals.

Brandon Lewis: I am happy to write to the hon. Lady. We are going through the judgment from the High Court, which did outline that the policy, in itself, is potentially okay. I am happy to come back to her with some details on that in due course.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Nottinghamshire police force has decided, without any consultation and with hardly any notice—literally, a note under the clerk’s door—to end community policing in Kimberley and Nuthall in my constituency. I do not expect the Minister to comment on the merits of the decision, but does he agree that in community policing, it is really important to work with and communicate with communities?

Mr Hurd: I could not agree with my right hon. Friend more. It is not for me to comment on the individual decision. Nottinghamshire police force does a good job and it has difficult decisions to take, but when it takes such decisions, it must make sure that it takes the community with it, particularly on an issue as sensitive as community policing.

T5. [901105] Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): A recent High Court ruling found that asylum seekers who had suffered torture had been detained unlawfully. Can the Secretary of State please provide to the House the date on which those individuals who were wrongfully detained will be freed?

Brandon Lewis: We do have a priority system, and I outlined earlier the high levels of success we have in dealing with applications in the timeframes set out in our service level agreements. Obviously, some cases have complexities to them, which means that they will take longer, and we let individual applicants know that.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): The Crown Prosecution Service report on violence against women and girls, which was published last week, demonstrated that real progress has been made in encouraging victims to report their crimes, and in improving the number of perpetrators who are prosecuted and convicted. But we know that many survivors do not involve the police. Women’s Aid found that only half of women in refuges report crimes against them, and only one in five women had seen a criminal case or sanctions against a perpetrator. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the welcome new domestic violence and abuse Bill will not only focus on the criminal justice system but deliver the progress that survivors need across all areas of Government, including housing, health and support for their children?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is right to point out the significant progress that the Government have made on tackling domestic violence and the support that we are giving to victims. We are not at all complacent, however, and we have a groundbreaking opportunity with the forthcoming legislation to make the prevention of domestic violence and abuse everyone’s business. I am working with vigour and at speed with colleagues across Government to make sure that we have, as my hon. Friend quite rightly points out we should, a joined-up approach that includes housing, welfare and employment.

T8. [901108] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary share my concern that the Intelligence and Security Committee has not met since April?

Amber Rudd: I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we have plenty of bilateral meetings that cover some of the elements that he has raised. We will be having a meeting of the National Security Committee soon, and when that takes place I will be able to reassure him.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Farmers in my constituency have recently encountered Travellers coming illegally on to their land. Does the Secretary of State believe that the police should be given more powers to deal with this issue?

Mr Hurd: That is a question that the House feels very strongly about, as evidenced by the number of colleagues on both sides of the House who took part in the recent debate. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Government are consulting on exactly that point.

T7. [901107] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What is the point of visa priority services if they do not actually provide any kind of priority? Will the Home Secretary reply to the letter I sent her in August containing several examples of constituents paying through the nose for priority tier 2 or settlement visas but waiting far longer than the promised 10 to 15 days for any kind of response?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a point, but waiting far longer than the promised 10 to 15 days for any kind of response is unacceptable. We are consulting on exactly that point.
Last year was the deadliest year on record for civilians there; this year, over 5,000 people have already been killed. Will the Minister commit to changing current Home Office guidance, which states that returning young people to Kabul is considered “reasonable”?

Brandon Lewis: We obviously keep all routes of return under review at all times to ensure that when we return people, on the basis of the evidence in the cases before us, we are doing the right thing for those people as well as for the United Kingdom. We will continue to do that, with the best interests of those individuals at heart.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The Minister is currently considering an application to bring together fire and policing functions in Northamptonshire, and I commend that to him in the strongest possible terms. What benefit does he see that sort of amalgamation bringing to the delivery of emergency services on the ground?

Mr Hurd: I see a major benefit in increased accountability and transparency for the people of Northamptonshire. There may also be significant financial benefits just from the efficiencies that such services can find together. I find from going around the country and talking to those people from the efficiencies that such services can find together.

There may also be significant financial benefits just from the efficiencies that such services can find together. There may also be significant financial benefits just from the efficiencies that such services can find together.

Mr Hurd: According to my information, Cheshire fire and rescue service has had a 31% reduction in fires over the past five years, and a 6% reduction in incidents. This year, it had a core spending power of £40.9 million, and at March 2017, it held reserves of £28 million.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Minister do this, manages, and we will see whether any additional funding is made available to the police forces?

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Last week, all parties backed a near unanimous motion on Ealing Council to introduce a public spaces protection order outside the Marie Stopes family planning clinic there, because three decades of protests by pro-lifers and one year of protests by pro-choicers have made it impossible for residents to pass along the pavement and have obstructed women having legal NHS healthcare. Will the Government issue guidance on whether other local authorities with such facilities within their boundaries should follow suit, or will there be a more national permanent solution?

Mr Speaker: I am indulgence itself, but give colleagues an inch and they take a mile.

Amber Rudd: I commend the hon. Lady for raising this subject. It is imperative that women have access to safe and legal abortion. Although we of course agree with this subject. It is imperative that women have access to safe and legal abortion. Although we of course agree

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, with fire deaths in Cheshire having increased every year for the past four years, cuts to fire services and, indeed, the downgrading of appliances cannot continue without severe consequences for local people?

Mr Hurd: The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): There is no evidence that that has happened. Of course, people think that it probably will happen, but at the moment the figures do not match the theory. When anyone returns about whom we have a suspicion that they have been fighting for any group or committed a crime overseas, they can expect to be arrested and questioned by the appropriate police forces. If there is evidence, we will obviously prosecute them for their crimes.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Another day, another awful story of a family split apart by the Government’s draconian family visa rules, this time the Newton family. When will the Home Secretary scrap the ludicrous income threshold and the other unwarranted requirements for spouse and partner visas?

Brandon Lewis: There are no plans to change the current situation whereby people need to be able to show that they can support those they bring into the country. People have to go through a full process, and that is absolutely right to ensure that we have a strong and clear immigration system.
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be aware that last week’s revelations about Cyril Smith in the child abuse inquiry demonstrate that the cover-up of decades of child abuse reached the highest levels of Government. Will she commit to releasing papers held by all Departments and agencies in relation to the case so that Cyril Smith’s many victims, who were denied justice in his lifetime, can now find it in theirs?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Lady that, where appropriate, those papers are being released. Some papers are held for national security reasons, and she would not want me to persuade the security services to release those. However, I am encouraged to hear her positive approach to the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse for perhaps the first time.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): In the Newtown area of my constituency there have been seven shootings in the past three months. Local people tell me that they simply do not feel safe, and cuts to police funding and neighbourhood policing are having a devastating impact. Why cannot the Home Secretary see that she is failing in her responsibility to resource the services that are required to keep us safe? How much more will my constituents have to suffer before she changes course?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady makes the valid point that a number of shooting crimes are being committed at the moment. That is why the Government have increased funding to police and specialist policing by £32 million for armed uplift to ensure that we have trained officers on the ground to deal with such threats, and that when we go after criminals who are armed, the police are protected and have the right equipment to do the job and make sure that those people are put in prison.

Mr Speaker: Last but never least, Mr Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Emergency workers are there to protect all of us, so an attack on an emergency worker is an attack on us all. Surely the law should therefore come down heavily on any assailant. Will the Home Secretary confirm for the avoidance of doubt that the Government will support my private Member’s Bill on Friday? Will she ensure that magistrates understand that, when they say that police officers and other emergency workers should have to put up with a certain amount of violence in their jobs, that is completely untrue? We should protect the protectors.

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman will know, certainly if he listened to the Home Secretary’s conference speech, that the Government are extremely supportive of the spirit of his Bill and included such measures in our manifesto. Any drama around the Government’s accepting the principle of his Bill is therefore of his manufacturing, as he well knows from our conversations. We want to support the Bill because we want to send the strongest possible signal that assaulting emergency workers is intolerable and anyone who does that should feel the full weight of the law. As with all private Members’ Bills, there will be detail to work through, but he knows that we support the principle of his Bill, on which we congratulate him.
Iran

3.44 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future of the joint comprehensive plan of action with Iran.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. The Government take note of President Trump’s decision not to recertify the joint comprehensive plan of action and are concerned by the implications. The Government are strongly committed to the deal. The JCPOA contributes to the United Kingdom’s wider non-proliferation objectives. The International Atomic Energy Agency continues to report Iran’s compliance with its nuclear commitments. We share serious concerns about Iran’s ballistic missile programme and its destabilising activity in the region.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. While I am, as always, grateful for the Minister’s presence and his opening remarks, I must say that it is a matter of deep regret that the Foreign Secretary did not consider this worthy of his attention today. For a man who so desperately wants to run the country, he shows surprisingly little interest in running his own Department.

The nuclear deal with Iran stands out as one of the most successful diplomatic achievements of the last decade, and let us be clear: the deal is working. What could today have been another North Korea-type crisis in the heart of the middle east has instead been one problem that the region does not have to worry about. For Donald Trump to jeopardise that deal—for him to move the goalposts by linking it to important but utterly extraneous issues around Iran’s wider activities in the region; for him to play these games—is reckless, mindless and downright dangerous. It makes a reality of Hillary Clinton’s prophecy that putting Donald Trump in the White House will create a real and present danger to world peace.

Let us make it clear that when Donald Trump talks about the deal needing to be fixed, that is utterly disingenuous, when the only evidence that it is in any way broken is a figment of his fevered brain. Yet sadly this behaviour is what we have come to expect of this President. Some of us in the House have been sounding these warnings from day one of his presidency, whether over climate change, human rights or the Iran nuclear deal. When we raised those fears in the House, what did the Foreign Secretary say? He said that I was being “too pessimistic”. He told us that his strategy of hugging the President close—inviting him to meet the Queen, holding his hand when needs be—was the way to wield influence. Specifically on the Iran deal, the Foreign Secretary stood at the Dispatch Box seven months ago and said that I had simply got it wrong on the Iran deal. He said: “We were told that the...plan of action on Iran, was going to be junked”;

but

“it is now pretty clear that America supports it.”—[Official Report, 28 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 116.]

Well, one of us got it wrong. One of us was being naive and complacent, and one of us is seven months too late in waking up to this issue. It really is high time that we had a Government capable of standing up to Donald Trump, not just meekly following his lead. Perhaps in his response the Minister can make a start by making clear two specific differences between this country’s policies and Donald Trump’s. Will he make it clear today that the Government will reject any attempt to make the deal subject to new conditions that have nothing to do with Iran’s ability to develop nuclear weapons? Will he also make it clear that we reject an approach whereby international agreements can be made by one President and torn up by the next for purely political reasons? It puts us in the invidious position that we will never ever feel secure doing a deal with America again. Will he share that concern today and reassure our allies that this is one Trump lead that the British Government will never follow?

Alistair Burt: I am answering a question about the future of the joint comprehensive plan of action with Iran, and I think I will focus more on Iran and the British Government’s position than anything else, because that is what I am required to do.

I thank the right hon. Lady in the first place for making it clear that she agrees with the Government’s assessment of the importance of the joint comprehensive plan of action and our belief that the deal is working. I can tell the House that this was a hard-won deal. It went through many years of negotiation. It was not designed as an all-embracing deal to cover everything that concerned the west and Iran, and both Iran and those who have signed the deal have made that clear. There are a number of issues on all sides, certainly involving ballistic missiles and also Iran’s activities in the region. As Foreign Minister Zarif made clear, however, at a meeting of the UN at which the Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, was present—as was I, representing the Government, and other signatories—if the deal is to be renegotiated, there is an awful lot on both sides to be renegotiated that was never contemplated by any party when we signed the deal. The deal was designed to do a specific job, which was to curtail Iran’s nuclear programme and its pursuit of a nuclear weapon, and so far it has done just that. That is why the UK strongly supports it.

Clearly we disagree with President Trump’s assessment. We do not fail to understand the United States’ concerns about Iran’s activities in the region, and we have made that clear, but we also believe that those matters need to be dealt with outside the agreement, which is why the agreement is so important. To have gone through all that and got something that works, in a world where it is quite difficult to get agreements that work, and then to put it to one side would not help the wider situation. We will continue to work our counsel with the United States and other parties to the agreement, and we will continue to work with the Iranian Government on matters of mutual interest, including those things about which we have concerns, to see if we can use the agreement as a possible springboard to future confidence, knowing that these things do not come quickly, but knowing also that signatures on deals matter. That is what the UK will adhere to.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Given the President’s astonishingly bovine decision—even by his standards—to decertify the joint comprehensive plan of action, against the best military and intelligence advice available to him, will my right hon. Friend assure the House that although we acknowledge, as he did, the very
considerable difficulties in dealing with Iran outside this agreement, it is through diplomacy that we have the greatest possible chance to achieve change and progress? Will he therefore assure the House further that there is no question of Her Majesty's Government supporting the President's view?

Alistair Burt: I can assure my right hon. Friend, whose expertise and long experience in these matters speak volumes, that what I said earlier about our disagreement with the President's assessment of the current state of the deal holds true. The implementation of the Iran nuclear deal marked a major step forward in preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon's capability. It immediately extended Iran's break-out time, meaning it would take it 12 months to get enough fissile material for a weapon, and has offered an opportunity for Iranians to make positive decisions about their country's future and its role in the region. We also recognise that the deal must be policed properly for it to remain a good deal. I say again that elements of Iran's conduct in the region cause concern in many states—we know that—but, as he said, these matters must be pursued through the bilateral relationship we are working on, together with other states that continue to engage with Iran seriously about its responsibilities in the region.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The deal shows what can be achieved through diplomacy and dialogue, and I pay tribute to those in Europe and elsewhere, including those in the Minister's Department, who worked so hard to make it a reality. Has the Minister been clear about his disagreement with the Trump Administration, and can he reveal to the House what his discussions have been? Also, to what extent will he continue to work with our European partners—our natural partners, not the enemy—on this issue?

Alistair Burt: I can assure the House and the hon. Gentleman that discussions with allies go on all the time, and obviously, in the run-up to consideration of the United States' position on Iran, there was consultation not only with the UK but with all the parties to the agreement, and those discussions will continue. The agreement remains in place, of course; the President has put elements of it to Congress for certification, but the US did not take the opportunity to scrap it completely. That gives us the opportunity to continue moving forward. Conversations about the agreement, which was signed by many parties, not just the US and Iran, will continue between allies.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I associate myself absolutely with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who made an excellent point? Has the Minister spoken to some of the other signatories—I am thinking particularly of France and Germany—to hear their view of the matter, and has he spoken to the Iranian Government to assure them, should they feel that a response should be made that would breach the agreement, that it would have consequences, and it would be very much in their interests to respect the agreement despite the actions of the White House?

Alistair Burt: At the recent United Nations General Assembly, the High Representative of the European Union called a meeting of all the signatories who were available. As I said a moment ago, I represented the Foreign Secretary, who was attending a Cabinet meeting in the UK. There was a discussion about our respective positions. This was a known meeting, not a private meeting, so I can disclose the situation. It was an opportunity for all the parties—knowing that the United States was considering its position very carefully—to say what they thought about the deal, and all of them except the United States professed that they believed it was working and that they intended to continue it.

This was the first meeting between Secretary of State Tillerson and Foreign Minister Zarif, and it gave the two of them an opportunity to have an exchange about their respective positions. I have to say that it was one of the most enlightening conversations that I listened to. I thought that both of them were perfectly honest in relation to their concerns about their positions. The Secretary of State explained, as did the President in his statement, some of the background to the United States' concerns, which Foreign Minister Zarif met.

The conclusion is that this was an agreement based not on trust but on distrust. That is why it was so painstaking, that is why it is so important, and that is why it needs to be adhered to. Making an agreement in these circumstances means that we must be very sure about commitments for the future, or about pulling away from them, if we are to build on that with the rest of the mistrust in the region.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): As the right hon. Gentleman can already tell, the Government's strong support for the deal is widely shared on both sides of the House. Does he agree, however, that among the consequences of President Trump's announcement are, first, that it will undermine confidence in international agreements of this sort—and, as we have already heard, this agreement was painfully and painstakingly negotiated by many people including Baroness Ashton—and, secondly, that it will enable the less than moderate forces in Iran to say to the more moderate forces, “We told you that you could not trust the United States of America”, which is not in anyone's interests?

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Gentleman speaks with great experience. Of course there is a risk that an agreement signed by one Administration and not followed through by another in its full terms will lead to exactly the consequences that he has described. In defence of its position, the United States has made it clear that the President was elected having said what he had said about the agreement, which had not been ratified by Congress, and he stands by that.

I think that we should focus less on what was said last week by one party to the agreement than on what is being said by all the other parties to it: that is, we recognise its importance, and we recognise the need to adhere to an agreement if it is working and is certified on all sides. It is the United Kingdom's view, and that of all the other signatories bar the United States, that the International Atomic Energy Agency has certified that Iran is living up to its obligations under the deal, and that that is the basis on which we should work. Certainly, if we want to encourage others to sign deals that may not benefit all elements of a regime, adhering to a deal is extremely important.
[Alistair Burt]

The right hon. Gentleman is right to recognise that there are different voices to be listened to and different voices that speak in Tehran, and it is essential for us to be cognisant of that before we take any particular action.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): When Sir Peter Westmacott was British ambassador in Washington, he held 47 one-to-one meetings with United States senators to persuade the United States Congress not to damage the agreement. Will the Minister assure the House that British diplomats are redoubling their efforts in Washington to ensure that Congress continues not to damage the agreement, and will he consider recalling to the colours some of our talented and expert people who may have thought that they were enjoying a well-deserved retirement?

Alistair Burt: On the latter part of my hon. Friend’s question, one of the most enjoyable parts of my role is to have access not only to current ambassadors but to those I have known and who have served the country in exemplary fashion, as has Peter Westmacott, and to be able to draw on their experience. I can therefore assure my hon. Friend that that experience is not lost.

Congress now has the opportunity to expedite legislation on Iran, and we understand it will discuss the issue in the coming weeks. We will continue to work with all our partners in the nuclear deal, including the US, to ensure that all parties implement it in full, and I can assure the House that our diplomatic service in Washington will indeed be working with all elements of the House, as we have done throughout all the terms of the deal.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The Minister has described how difficult and complex it was to negotiate this deal, which was such a significant step forward, and is, of course, now at risk. May I urge him to be a little bolder and state clearly on the record whether he thinks this intervention from the US President will make it easier or more difficult to reach successful multilateral diplomatic agreements in future?

Alistair Burt: That is a good question. Honesty in these matters is very important, and if we know anything about President Trump and his Administration it is that he did make certain things clear before he was elected, which he has followed through on, and I think that the President and the United States would defend their actions in that way. There is of course a significant risk: agreements do go on, Government to Government, and ensuring that an agreement is adhered to is fundamental to international negotiations. The fact is that the agreement stays in place, and the other signatories are clear about what it means, and have been very clear with the Iranian Government that they believe they are upholding their obligations and that they must continue to do so. Again, let there be no doubt that Iran has occasionally pushed at the boundaries of this agreement, but those matters have been resolved. Provided that all the signatories remain in compliance, it is the view of the United Kingdom and others beyond the United States that the agreement should stay in place. I would hope that that would continue, on further reflection, to be the view of all signatories to the agreement, but that will depend on all parties adhering to the letter of the agreement.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Government dust off the files marked “Cold war containment” and try to get the message across to our American friends and allies that a policy of containment while repressive societies evolve is the best way to deal with countries like Iran?

Alistair Burt: Again, I thank my right hon. Friend, who has long experience of these matters. If there is a colleague in the House associated with the cold war, it might, indeed, be my right hon. Friend. For his considerable knowledge, and, if I may say so, the occasional activity associated with it, which are a subject of his memoirs. His point is right. The world went through an awful time in the cold war, as some of us will remember and others will not. The world teetered on the brink of nuclear disaster, and was only pulled back by sensible decisions and the bravery of people in very difficult circumstances. We feel we have moved forward by trying to get the agreements we need. We know where the threats are in other parts of the world where an agreement has not been possible: there is no JCPOA in the far east, and we worry about the consequences of that.

I repeat what I said earlier about the United Kingdom’s position: the fact that this hard-won deal dealt with an aspect of the relationship between Iran and the rest of the world in a manner that could be verified and enabled us to move on, notwithstanding the fact that there were other issues, was really important. If we are not to see a return to cold war, we should look for the opportunity to make that engagement, and be honest in our relationships with each other on things we cannot agree on, but always try to find a way through without isolation and cutting contacts, as that only requires a climb-down at some stage in the future to find a way to re-engage.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does this episode not illustrate the folly of breaking from our natural friends and allies in Europe and throwing in our lot with an unpredictable and irrational American President? That would be the outcome of the extreme hard Brexit that the Minister’s boss and the other hard Brexiteers on his Benches are pursuing.

Alistair Burt: I might be the wrong Minister to answer all the details of that question. I simply want to make it clear that I get no indication from my friends in the EU who have been connected with this agreement that any distinction is made between our relationship before the referendum and our relationship now or in the future in relation to these matters. We are firm colleagues and we will remain firm colleagues. This matter overrides those considerations, and I am absolutely sure that those strong friendships and the way in which we see the world will remain the same.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I welcome the Government’s position. Does the Minister realise that what is important is the regime’s direction of travel, and that the moderates have the upper hand in Iran, in large part because of this deal? Will the Government therefore do what they can to encourage Congress not to make the wrong decision during the 60-day window? Otherwise, the implications for the rules-based international system will be obvious, not least to the North Koreans.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is an experienced member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and he well understands some of the dynamics relating to Iran. Iran is a complex
political society with different representatives and different voices, as I said earlier. It is clear that there are elements in Iran who saw the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—JCPOA—as an opportunity to open possibilities for the country on the wider stage, and who recognised that for those possibilities to be maximised, other behaviour had to be recognised and curtailed. There may be others in Iran who saw the agreement in a different light. The United Kingdom's position is to believe that the signing of the agreement brought an opportunity to continue to work with those who wanted to see Iran return to the world stage. It will not be able to do that if it continues with disruptive activity in the regions, but adhering to this agreement has been very important. The Foreign Secretary has spoken to Foreign Minister Zarif twice in the past week—once before the President's announcement and once after it—and I am sure that he made that clear to those elements who wish to see the JCPOA leading to something good for the future of the region.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that President Trump is a proliferator, that he is encouraging the undermining of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and that by his action he will make it almost impossible to get any agreement on North Korea?

Alistair Burt: In all fairness, it is not for me to deal with the intentions of the President in the manner that the hon. Gentleman suggests. I simply reiterate that the United Kingdom disagrees with the rationale behind the President's decision. We understand the importance of the non-proliferation treaty, which has been one of the great successes among international agreements in the past 30 or 40 years, and also therefore the importance of signatures on agreements, where those agreements can be verified. We will continue to work with all our partners, including the United States, to try to ensure that our point of view is one that they recognise and support.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I should like to join the universal welcome for the Government's continuing support for the nuclear deal, which is working. Does the Minister agree that creating economic interdependence with Iran should be a general policy objective to deliver more leverage over future behaviour on non-nuclear-related matters?

Alistair Burt: The relationship between states is often complex, and it is doubly so in relation to Iran. We want to see a bilateral relationship with Iran that is based on our values. Trade is clearly important but it cannot be carried on at the expense of those values. Also, the term “leverage” should be considered carefully. It should always be to the mutual advantage of any states that their relationships with one another are based on peace, security, compatibility of values and the opportunity to go over differences and resolve them without conflict. That is what we will continue to do. There are issues between ourselves and Iran, such as the consular matters that people well understand, and we will continue to press them. We hope that the relationship that we are trying to forge will be based on our values and the needs of the rest of the region, which will require Iran to recognise that some of its activities could and should take a different course.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister's statement is welcome and moves us forward, but he will recall that part of the logic behind the decision to engage with Iran on the basis of distrust, as he says, was the potential for a nuclear-armed Iran to lead to a nuclear arms race in the middle east. What steps will the Government take to say to our friends in the middle east that it is not in their interest to see the agreement destabilised?

Alistair Burt: Most of our friends and partners in the middle east recognise that the non-proliferation treaty has prevented the acquisition of nuclear weapons, which would have been easy. Many states possess the wealth to equip themselves with nuclear weapons, but they have not done so because they accepted the terms of the treaty and other international agreements. The importance of continuing with the JCPOA is about ensuring that the signatories remain convinced that parties and powers that sign such agreements will abide by them. I have heard no suggestion that the President's decision marks a change in that attitude among neighbouring powers, who realise how destabilising a change in Iran's position on the non-proliferation treaty would be. I have also received no suggestion that Iran's seeking nuclear weapons is likely to be an outcome of what we heard last week.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): If the agreement will not in itself control Iran's financing of terrorist groups, will the Minister say a word about how it is acting as a springboard? That would give people more confidence in the deal.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend goes into other aspects of Iran's activity in the region over which a veil cannot and should not be drawn. I will again make the point that the JCPOA was not meant in any way to draw a line under or cover up Iran's activities. It is not the case that if Iran stuck to this element of the deal, everything else would no longer need to be considered. Other measures are in place to deal with such things. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is covered by EU sanctions, for example, and sanctions are available against those who finance terrorist activity, which would include some in Iran. EU sanctions are already in place in relation to Iranian individuals who have been suspected of human rights abuses, for example. Other leverage is available to deal with our concerns about Iran, and sanctions remain available to us, but we want to use the agreement as an opportunity to deal with the things on which Iran could and should do more. We will continue to do that by developing a bilateral relationship with Iran.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Britain had just restarted diplomatic relations with Iran and a new British ambassador was on his way to Tehran when George W. Bush foolishly included Iran in the “axis of evil” speech, making it much more difficult for us to progress our relations with Iran. Is it not now all the more important to make it absolutely clear that we are a country in our own right and will not necessarily follow the American line, and that we will want to make strong alliances with our allies in Europe in the future, even if we are not a member of the EU?

Alistair Burt: I agree with all the hon. Gentleman's sentiments, and the Foreign Secretary met Vice-President Salehi last week. I reiterate that the importance of the agreement is that it dealt with one aspect of the relationship, but there are other aspects. I do not gloss over our other issues with Iran, which will not be in our bilateral discussions, but at least they can be spoken about and at least there is a pathway forward. There is a chance of
new relationships if each party to the agreement accepts their obligations, particularly in relation to any potential activities in other states.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): While not ignoring human rights abuses and the abuse of minorities, including Christians—the Minister either has acknowledged or would acknowledge such abuses—does he agree it is important for the international community to continue with dialogue to reach a diplomatic solution, and that this nuclear deal makes the region a safer place?

Alistair Burt: I agree with that assessment. As I mentioned earlier, we have only to look at the situation in another part of the world where no such deal exists and where there is deep concern about the movement of a power towards nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons testing. The deal with Iran covers off that issue in an important state in a region that badly needs stability and needs all states to recognise their responsibilities to each other. Closing doors does not help. It is important that states are firm, clear and honest with each other. Not covering things up but always looking for an opportunity to seek change and development: that should be the product of conversations between states that want to achieve something.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Is it not true that one of the dominant voices in Iran is the Revolutionary Guard, the people who blocked the release of Nazanin Ratcliffe? However much we might worry about President Trump’s actions, would we not be mad of Nazanin Ratcliffe? However much we might worry about the Revolutionary Guard, the people who blocked the release of Nazanin Ratcliffe, is it not true that one of the dominant voices in Iran is the Revolutionary Guard, the people who blocked the release of Nazanin Ratcliffe? However much we might worry about President Trump’s actions, would we not be mad of Nazanin Ratcliffe?

Alistair Burt: I agree with that assessment. As I mentioned earlier, we have only to look at the situation in another part of the world where no such deal exists and where there is deep concern about the movement of a power towards nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons testing. The deal with Iran covers off that issue in an important state in a region that badly needs stability and needs all states to recognise their responsibilities to each other. Closing doors does not help. It is important that states are firm, clear and honest with each other. Not covering things up but always looking for an opportunity to seek change and development: that should be the product of conversations between states that want to achieve something.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Is it not true that one of the dominant voices in Iran is the Revolutionary Guard, the people who blocked the release of Nazanin Ratcliffe? However much we might worry about President Trump’s actions, would we not be mad to rely on the word and behaviour of the Revolutionary Guard for nuclear security, or anything else?

Alistair Burt: It is precisely because we do not need to rely on anyone’s word—we can rely on a deal verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and its work to verify the deal’s commitments—that we have been able to make progress on reducing the number of centrifuges, reducing the amount of stored uranium, reducing heavy water capacity and reducing Iran’s ability to create more. All those things are verifiable. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I have mentioned the important distinction that this agreement is not based on each side trusting the word of the other; it is because of the very fact that words cannot always be trusted that there has to be something concrete and visible, and verified by independent parties, on which to proceed. That is what the deal is about. There are words that cannot be relied on in any international context, which is why agreements, and sticking to agreements, are so important.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Although no one disputes the unsettling nature of the Iranian regime, this deal, which was the culmination of 13 years of negotiation, has stopped Iran building a nuclear weapon. Does the Minister agree that Trump’s aggressive stance undermines our collective influence and responsibility in managing global security?

Alistair Burt: Since the deal was signed Iran has given up two thirds of its centrifuges and 95% of its uranium stockpile. Our priority is to work with the deal and make it deliver for our shared security interests. It is helpful if all the parties to the agreement move at the same speed and in the same way. The United States has declared why it does not currently agree with the deal, and we disagree, and have disagreed publicly, with its rationale. We will continue to engage with Iran for the very reasons that my hon. Friend states—for global security and certainty on agreements between states.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Can the agreement carry on without the United States? What is the practical implication of the US position?

Alistair Burt: I knew at some stage a question would be asked that is beyond my pay grade. I have always taken the view that there are many signatories to this agreement. The United States is considering the possibility of new legislation, but it remains a party to the deal, so the deal stays in place. We do not want to contemplate a situation in which one party unilaterally withdraws, because of the implications for other parties. We will do all in our power to ensure that all parties to the agreement continue to adhere to its provisions, that the deal stays in place and that it forms the basis of further discussions about the matters of disagreement between us so that we can build a new consensus on what is needed in the region.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The deal has made the world a safer place, but it does not cover all aspects, as my right hon. Friend has said. Some constituents of mine are worried that we are giving too much to Iran and ignoring the sponsorship of terrorism that goes on elsewhere. The deal is vital and it can be the way a peaceful solution can be moved forward, but will he confirm that Britain still stands with other countries that may be affected by the terrorism sponsored by Iran, such as that of Hezbollah and Hamas?

Alistair Burt: I thank my hon. Friend for his observations and remarks, as he gives me another opportunity to make things clear. If this deal had tried to cover all the aspects of concern between the signatories and Iran, it would never have been signed—it just would not have happened. The whole point of the deal was to fix an area between two groups of people who were concerned about each other on which they could agree and on which there could be external verification to mean that that particular issue was dealt with. That was the purpose of the deal. At no stage was it envisaged that everything else of concern would suddenly disappear. As I indicated earlier, we remain concerned about Iran’s ballistic missile testing and its activity throughout the region, but conversations go on between ourselves and Iran—and other states—on that and on the financing of terror. We can deal with those other issues in other ways, and sanctions will be applied where this is appropriate—where behaviour has been uncovered which breaks international rules.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Minister has said that the approach should be “firm, clear and honest”. Will he give his reassurance to the House that that is how he and Ministers will treat the ongoing discussions about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe?

Alistair Burt: Yes, I repeat what I said in Westminster Hall last week: we remain concerned for all our dual nationals currently detained in Iran. Conversations about them are going on and we believe that on humanitarian
grounds these cases need to be looked at seriously by the authorities in Iran. We have made our views very clear, very regularly and at the highest levels.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I, too, welcome the Minister’s stance on the Iran deal. He has already made reference to it, but can he reiterate his confidence in the ongoing monitoring programme?

Alistair Burt: I can, yes. It is our belief that the IAEA has the access it needs to give the parties to the deal—beyond perhaps the United States—the confidence that the deal is being adhered to. That is our view.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) has just asked the question I was going to ask, but it seems a shame to waste all this standing up and sitting back down again, so may I ask the Minister to expand on whether the UK Government and others are actively preparing for a scenario in which the US formally secedes from this arrangement and yet the basic framework is kept in place?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman illustrates that no question is ever wasted here, and that was a good question. As always, the Government have to prepare for all eventualities. It is our belief that the JCPOA should be adhered to and all parties should stick with it, but of course should there be any change in that, we are always prepared. At the moment, we believe the agreement should stay in place and we have the agreement of many parties on all sides for that view.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given wider concerns about the Iranian regime’s appalling human rights record, particularly on LGBT—lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—issues and with the persecution of Christians, we can understand why people have some scepticism about accepting its word. Will the Minister reassure me as to just how thorough the monitoring of this deal is, so that everyone can have confidence that we are getting exactly what it intended to deliver?

Alistair Burt: As I said, we know enough about the International Atomic Energy Agency’s activity to be confident that the deal is being verified. There are elements of the deal that are confidential between the IAEA and Iran—we do not need to go into that—but we are confident about the verification and the matters that have already delivered certain very visible changes with respect to Iran’s nuclear stockpile.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): We welcome the tripartite statement on this issue over the weekend from the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of Germany and the President of France, as well as the Minister’s comments today. Does not that statement indicate that the British Government’s foreign policy voice is magnified when they work with other EU countries and that it is a mistake to use defence and security co-operation as a bargaining chip in the EU divorce negotiations?

Alistair Burt: I am absolutely certain that the UK’s relationship with its partners on the continent, within or without our membership of the EU, will always have foreign defence and security matters firmly at its heart.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The Minister is right to say that even those who support the deal have grave misgivings about Iran’s malign regional attitude. The Iranians themselves boast of dominating four Arab capitals, and they are actively and often violently seeking to undermine important regional allies of this country. What practical steps are being taken, with our allies, to address and counter that threat?

Alistair Burt: We remain concerned by the destabilising activities of revolutionary guards in the region—particularly in Syria, Iraq and Yemen—and the IRGC in its entirety remains subject to EU sanctions. Sanctions are only one tool available to the international community. The UK believes that there are other means of challenging Iran’s disruptive regional activity that may be more effective, but we are open to considering other matters where appropriate, working in concert with EU partners.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend’s understanding the same as that of the EU High Representative: that no one country has the authority to veto the deal?

Alistair Burt: I think it is, in that we were all signatories to the deal. No one wants to see one party come out of it unilaterally, but if one did and others thought the same, that would undermine the deal. We very much want to keep the provisions of the JCPOA going. It provides a degree of certainty about Iran’s nuclear programme, and it does not close off other opportunities to deal with issues. I must say one further thing: at the meeting in New York, Foreign Minister Zarif made it clear that his state had issues, too. It is not for me to comment on the quality of those issues or anything else, but he indicated that if the agreement was thrown up in the air and there was a renegotiation, Iran wanted to bring many other issues into the conversation. My view was that we should keep the JCPOA and make sure we are open to talking about those different issues; I did not get the impression from Secretary of State Tillerson that he was averse to continuing his conversations with Foreign Minister Zarif. That would give us the opportunity to make progress with the many different voices in Tehran and to move forward with those who foresee a different future for Iran if there are changes in its relationships to its neighbours in the region, to the benefit of all and the security of the rest of the world.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): RAF Coningsby in my constituency is the home of the Typhoon jets that keep the nation’s skies safe. I am pleased that some constituents of mine have visited the House today. Will my right hon. Friend please assure the people who play such a vital role in the nation’s security that every diplomatic effort is being made so that, please God, they never have to face the consequences of diplomacy failing?

Alistair Burt: I can absolutely confirm what my hon. Friend said, and I am pleased to endorse that. If the House will allow me one indulgence, my father was a medical officer at Coningsby many years ago, and he recently paid it a visit: 70 years on, he was able to climb into a Lancaster bomber. The way he and his friends were treated that day made it a wonderful experience for him, as someone who had played his part in the RAF many years ago. We pay tribute to those who are working day and night for our security.
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The special and historic relationship we have with the United States puts us in a very good position, if not the best, among all the signatories to the agreement, to make clear to the Administration things that I know my right hon. Friend will find the right diplomatic language for. The old dictum is that we campaign in poetry but govern in prose. Being the leader of the free world requires more skills than being a gameshow host or a contestant on “The X Factor”.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is slightly tempting me to use a type of language and to go down a route that might be more appropriate from the Back Benches than at the Dispatch Box. He makes his point well, but we all understand that the President recognises the responsibility that he bears on behalf of many, and that he will continue to listen to partners in relation to defence and security. We will continue to look at all opportunities to do that, particularly in relation to this agreement.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is it the availability of intelligence that has prompted the Government of Israel to support the President’s assessment?

Alistair Burt: If it was, we do not comment on intelligence matters anyway. None the less, I will say that there are many different voices in Israel as well on this particular agreement. There is no alternative agreement being put forward. I am not aware of an alternative JCPOA being put forward by any powers, and I remain of the view, as do the UK Government, that this agreement does the job that it is designed to do. It does not close our eyes to other things that need to be dealt with, and Israel has genuine concerns about Iranian activity in the region. Those concerns stand whether or not the agreement goes forward, but they are easier to deal with if we keep this agreement in place.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): In contrast to some Opposition Members, I believe in the special relationship with the US. It is a mutually beneficial and enduring relationship that goes way beyond that between one US President and one UK Prime Minister. Can the Minister assure me that the Government are pulling all the available levers in that relationship at every level to persuade our American friends to retain this deal?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right in recognising that the United Kingdom’s relationship with the United States is very deep and that, at many levels, contacts are going on all the time right through Government. He can be absolutely assured that those relationships, led by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe and the Americas, ensure that our voice is heard in the United States at the highest levels.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): May I caution my right hon. Friend about seeing this issue purely through the lens of Donald Trump? There are many good friends of the United Kingdom on Capitol Hill, such as Senator John McCain and Congressman Ryan, who have serious and legitimate concerns about this deal, as indeed do friends in Israel and the Gulf states. May I also ask him to consider the comments of Senator McCain over the weekend, which, I think, suggested that there would be more support on Capitol Hill for continuing the deal were the international community to take forward separate and significant activity against Iran’s state sponsorship of terror?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend makes a serious point. I can assure him that the United Kingdom is not considering this matter purely through the eyes of the President, although his statement is of course definitive as a Government position. As I said when I began my remarks, I was able to comment on a discussion that I was part of between Secretary of State Tillerson and Foreign Minister Zarif, in which they gave their view of why they were at odds with each other.

The Secretary of State enunciated very well the sort of concerns that are held by a number of Members of the House of Congress and other people in America and in other states. There is no doubt that the concerns expressed by the President are held by others. However, the point is how to use those doubts and whether those doubts were sufficient to put at risk the JCPOA. It is the United Kingdom’s view that they were not and that those other issues, important as they are, should be handled in a different way, but that the JCPOA should stay in place. We will endeavour to work with our allies in relation to that point of view.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Much as many might wish it to, what the JCPOA proscribes is very tight and does not cover things such as ballistic missiles or human rights. Will the Minister outline why such tight proscription is in fact in our interest and Iran’s? The wider we range on issues such as this, the harder it will be to strike any deal.

Alistair Burt: I said earlier that Foreign Minister Zarif has made it clear to the other parties of the agreement that, had the agreement sought to go wider after the years of fairly torturous negotiations on the nucelotile, it simply would not have been signed. If it had not been signed, Iran would have been continuing to proceed on a path that we all felt might lead to the possibility of a nuclear weapon in the region, with all those implications. It was better to have that agreement signed on those terms and to continue work on the other things than it would have been simply to try to find such an all-embracing deal that it would never have been signed by Iran.

Let me spell out to the House the product of the deal. Iran has shipped more than 12 tonnes of enriched uranium to Russia to eliminate its stock of 20% enriched uranium; removed more than 13,000 centrifuges and associated infrastructure; removed the core of the Arak heavy water reactor; removed all excess heavy water to the Arak reactor to prevent the production of weapons-grade plutonium; allowed greater IAEA access and the use of online monitoring; provisionally implemented the IAEA additional protocol; and agreed a procurement channel for authorised exports of nuclear-rated goods and services to Iran. All that was achieved by the deal.

We would hold that—notwithstanding the extraneous views to the Minister? This is not a permanent fix to Iran’s nuclear weapons programme. Limits on that
programme begin to wind down in just eight years’
time. In the meantime, Iran is looking to construct an
airfield and a naval base in Syria, and is developing
plans to send a division of troops to Syria. In 10 years’
time, we could face the prospect, with a 12-month
breakout period, of Iran’s having a bigger military
footprint in no time at all. How does the Minister
respond to that?

Alistair Burt: If the deal comes to the end with no
further agreement about provisions for the future, Iran
would still be subject to the nuclear proliferation treaty
as it was before. Those provisions will stay in place.
Having agreed this treaty, there is no reason to believe
that it will not be possible to continue its terms and,
clearly, the parties will want to achieve that.

My hon. Friend quite rightly mentions the other
activities of Iran that cause concern in the region, and
those concerns are very real. We all know enough about
this place and politics to know that if everybody agrees
on something, there is often a problem. It is right that
we hear alternative voices and it is important to listen to
things that might be contrary to what we wish if we are
to ensure that what we wish for is what happens in
reality. That is what the United Kingdom is very clear-
sighted on—its relations with its partners, with the
United States and with Iran.

Vauxhall (Redundancies)

4.38 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab)
(Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make
a statement on the announcement by Vauxhall to move
staff in Ellesmere Port from two production shifts to
one in early 2018, resulting in 400 redundancies in the
next few months.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire
Perry): Just over 53 years ago, the first Vauxhall Viva
rolled off the production line at Ellesmere Port. Since
then, seven generations of Astra have been built at the
port. Most recently, the plant secured the contract for
the mark 7, primarily based on the productivity and
co-operation of the local workforce. That is why it is
particularly disappointing to hear that Vauxhall is
considering voluntary redundancies of up to 400 staff
at the Ellesmere Port plant.

As we said last week, this is a concerning time for
families, particularly in the run-up to Christmas. I assure
the hon. Gentleman and other right hon. and hon.
Members that, once again, the Government are standing
by to do all we can to support those affected. The
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
is continuing to speak with the company, the unions
and the wider supply chain and the Department for
Work and Pensions is standing by to provide advice and
support to those affected.

I will address three points. First, I will set out what is
actually happening to try to reassure people who may
be affected by the announcement today. Secondly, I will
give some background to what I understand are the reasons
for it happening. Thirdly, I will put the announcement
in the broader context of the automotive industry.

Today, I have spoken to the head and deputy head of
Cheshire West and Chester Council, the chief executive
of the local enterprise partnership, the general secretary
of Unite the union and the chief executive of Vauxhall
UK. The consensus view is that this is due to a downturn
in the sale cycle, particularly that of the Astra model,
and the company is working through questions about
the plant’s overall competitiveness.

I was pleased to hear today from the leader and
deputy leader of the local council that a redundancy
action support plan, which has been used before, will be
put in place and will involve the LEP, the council and
and the Department for Work and Pensions all working
together. Given that many of the people working in the
plant travel across the border from Wales to their jobs
every day, it is particularly important to note that the
Welsh Government have been involved and stand by,
ready to support any activities.

Given how many skilled workers may be affected by
the announcement, we are particularly keen, as we
discussed last week, to ensure that those skills are not
lost to the industry. I have asked that the Government’s
talent retention scheme be deployed, if appropriate, and both the company and Unite the union have agreed that that would be helpful and will agree to work with us. As I have said, I understand that this is a particularly troubling time and we are all absolutely concerned to minimise worries, particularly in the run-up to Christmas.

As I have said, I am told that this is happening because the C-segment class, in which the Astra vehicles sit, is not selling brilliantly across Europe and, in particular, the sales forecast for that model has not been as desired. Therefore, a decision has been taken to maintain the competitive position of the plant, and that announcement is being made today. The Secretary of State and I have consulted the company extensively on its future plans, both for the plant in Elsmere Port, particularly given its long and illustrious history, and for the company and its footprint in the UK.

That brings me to my third point about the broader context. As we have seen with many other companies, the technology in the auto sector is pivoting away from the traditional models, towards electric, potentially connected and autonomous vehicles. We are doing all we can to support manufacturers in that shift, and to position the UK as the leading place for those decisions and investments to be taken.

We have already delivered more than £500 million of public and private money through the Advanced Propulsion Centre. We will spend £1.25 billion of Government and investments to be taken.

Of course, the auto industry has been an incredible success story. Thanks to the workers in the plants, we now have the highest productivity levels in Europe and the C-segment class, in which the Astra vehicles sit, is not selling brilliantly across Europe and, in particular, the sales forecast for that model has not been as desired. Therefore, a decision has been taken to maintain the competitive position of the plant, and that announcement is being made today. The Secretary of State and I have consulted the company extensively on its future plans, both for the plant in Elsmere Port, particularly given its long and illustrious history, and for the company and its footprint in the UK.

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We have already delivered more than £500 million of public and private money through the Advanced Propulsion Centre. We will spend £1.25 billion of Government and investments to be taken.

Of course, the auto industry has been an incredible success story. Thanks to the workers in the plants, we now have the highest productivity levels in Europe and sales of cars made in the UK are up 70% since 2009. It is a huge success story and we have generated many exports.

All of us in this House should think really hard about the message we are sending to those looking to invest in the UK—in—[Interruption]—and back the fact that we have highly productive plants and highly skilled workforces. Regardless of the changes that may happen in this sector, this is the place for auto companies to invest in the future. Perhaps Members who want to chunter otherwise should think about the messages we are sending to those investors.

Another important point—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure there are a lot of important points that could be made, but I gently say to the Minister that she has exceeded her allotted time by two and a half minutes. I think her other important point can either be neatly shoehorned into one of her, I hope, pithy replies, or it can be put in the Library, where in the long winter evenings that lie ahead colleagues will be free to consult the relevant material.

Claire Perry: Order. It is so long since the start of the ministerial
reply that I had forgotten that we have not yet heard from the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). We shall hear from him first.

Justin Madders: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her response.

This is deeply concerning news for those at the plant and for the automotive sector more widely. It will have a significant impact on the local economy. What action can the Minister take to ensure that there are no compulsory redundancies? As she said, the consensus is that the reason for this decision is changing consumer trends, but PSA has also given a very clear warning about the future. Nature abhors a vacuum, and business. Industry is crying out for the clarity that it needs to invest in the future of this country, but all it sees coming out of Westminster is the squabbling, plotting and manoeuvring of Ministers in a Government completely paralysed by their own self-indulgent activities. If this news tells us anything, it is that business will not wait around while Ministers argue among themselves. I should make it clear that I do not include the Minister as one of those concerned more with their own future than with the country’s, but I ask her to say to her colleagues that the posturing and preparation has to stop.

It has been made repeatedly clear that without clarity on future trading arrangements, the UK car industry remains vulnerable. What assurances can the Minister give to my constituents that their future matters to all in the Government? The plant union, Unite, has shown that it can work positively with management, but it cannot do it on its own. It needs backing across the board from the Government, and support in the Budget that is approaching. I hope that the Minister will confirm that she is making a very strong case to the Treasury for a much greater level of support in terms of reducing plant costs and expanding the local supply chain. To that end, will she seek to meet those at the highest level of PSA and other stakeholders, including trade unions and local MPs, so that we can discuss how this support can be delivered as an urgent priority?

These are not just my constituents; they are my friends and neighbours. When I go back home, I want to tell them that Parliament is united and determined to give them all the backing required, so that the redundancies announced today are the last.

Mr Speaker: That was commendably within time, and a good example to other colleagues on both sides of the House.

Claire Perry: I absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that we stand ready to work with him and his colleagues, the local LEP, the local council and anyone else, including the unions, to make sure that we have a good outcome and also an investment outcome for the future. As he will know, there is a huge amount of cross-party consensus on our industrial strategy and our clean growth strategy. The resulting confidence is shown by the fact that over the past few months we have seen some very significant investment news from auto industries in Sunderland, in Burnaston in the east midlands, and in Oxford. There is a vote of confidence: let us make sure that it continues.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the UK automotive industry has in fact been a huge success story? Can she give assurances to PSA and others—I have companies in my constituency that
make parts for cars, so this is very important to them, too—that this Government will provide, with their industrial strategy, a framework that ensures there is a major emphasis on the automotive industry as we go forward, particularly in the new technologies such as electric cars, other electric vehicles and battery storage, to mention just a few?

**Claire Perry:** My hon. Friend makes a compelling case. It has indeed been a success story, but I suspect that is not much comfort for those people going home tonight and discussing this over the tea table with their families. That is why we want to make absolutely sure that this country is the place for long-term investment. We know that this has happened as a result of the sales cycle, which has been disappointing for this car. We want to make sure that longer-term investment decisions, in Ellesmere Port and other parts of the industry are backed up and supported and that this is the place to keep doing business in the auto sector.

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for securing this urgent question.

As we know, Vauxhall has announced that 400 jobs are potentially to be lost at the Ellesmere Port plant, only a few months after being bought by PSA Group. The Opposition warned at the time that Vauxhall’s UK plants and the 40,000 people employed in the wider supply chain could be significantly at risk. In response, the Secretary of State said: “The Prime Minister and I have been engaged in discussions...to ensure that the terms of the agreement can give confidence to Vauxhall’s UK workforce now and for the future.”—[Official Report, 7 March 2017; Vol. 622, c. 570.]

Can the Minister confirm whether those discussions have been ongoing, and if so, what was their outcome? What conversations has she had with Vauxhall regarding the decision to move to a single production shift? Has it been reported in the media that “PSA made clear that future investments in the plant were on hold until negotiations on the UK’s future with the European Union had become clearer.”

The hon. Lady asked whether we are sending a clear signal. We continue to send a clear signal to this company and others that we will stand by them as the future evolves, to make sure that we are not left in the slow lane of technological innovation, but that we lead the field. We will reassure companies as much as possible about the certainty that we require from the Brexit negotiations—namely that, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have made incredibly clear, we should have the closest possible relationship with the single market.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Is my hon. Friend working together with the company and local government to ensure that the skills of those highly-skilled people who may, sadly, lose their jobs in the next few weeks and months will be retained in the area and built on? One thing that we learned from Germany in the late 2000s, during the great recession, is that if those skills are retained in the area, it will be possible to boost not only other companies but Vauxhall if it begins, as we all hope it will, to take on people again in the future to work on other models.

**Claire Perry:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is vital that we maintain those skills. It is worth noting that there is a significant cluster of other businesses in the region, which is home to Bentley Motors, Jaguar Land Rover, Getrag Ford, Toyota’s engine plant and Leyland Trucks. It is really important that we continue to invest in those skills to minimise job losses and to ensure that the country does not lose the talent that people have built up over the years.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): At the heart of this announcement, there are hundreds of families who are now worried about their futures. They will need more from the Government than warm words, so the Minister should ensure that they get the meaningful support that they need for their future.

Although the parent company has cited declining market share as a reason for its decision, it is also quoted as saying that it halted UK investment plans because of the Government’s lack of “visibility on the future trading relationship with the EU”.

Figures show that direct foreign investment has vaporised in the UK. Instead of being given a level playing field—let alone the possibility of market advantage—business,
workers and communities continue to be let down by this long and humiliating Brexit chaos. Will the Minister admit that to secure the future of jobs and investment, the only sensible option is to remain in the single market and the customs union?

**Claire Perry:** As I have said, I do not think that anyone wants us to re-run the Brexit debate. We need to get on with this and make sure that the outcome—it represents the majority view in the constituencies that the majority of Government and Opposition Members represent, so we must deliver on it—is the best possible result for the workers of Ellesmere Port, the workers that support the industry and workers right across Britain's industrial and manufacturing base.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): We are exporting automobiles very successfully to the United States against a 10% tariff. How much better would we do with free trade?

**Claire Perry:** My right hon. Friend invites me to comment on the estimates held by Her Majesty's Treasury, but I can tell him that we are one of the major exporters of automobiles in Europe and around the world, and we need to maintain that. Indeed, we make and export one in five of the electric vehicles driven on the continent, so we are already pivoting towards that new technology. Let us make sure we get more investment, so that we can continue to employ more people in the future.

**Mr George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): The Minister rightly praised the high levels of productivity and the skills of the workforce, and she mentioned—again, quite properly—the Government's industrial strategy, but what sort of industrial strategy is it that takes no account of the changes that have taken place in our currency since the referendum and, more importantly, what account does it take of our deteriorating and chaotic future relationship with the European Union?

**Claire Perry:** Focusing on today's announcement, my understanding is that domestic sales of the Astra have been the problem, not sales in Europe. The supply chain to the auto industry—the steel sector—has of course done rather well from the currency move, which has benefited many people working in other areas. We need to focus not on the vagaries of long-term currency movements, but on the long-term support we collectively give to this industry and the investment the Government can make in the technology of the future.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Minister may be aware that, when I was a councillor in the midlands a decade ago, we faced the challenges affecting Jaguar Land Rover at that time and the potentially dire warnings. Well, we need only look at where it is today to deal with that heckle. What reassurance will the Minister give me that this company will be supported to move towards the sort of success that Jaguar Land Rover now enjoys, creating thousands of new jobs, despite the scepticism of Opposition Members?

**Claire Perry:** I commend my hon. Friend for his experience. Again, there are frequent, regular and detailed calls about the company's long-term strategy with regard to the UK and investment in this highly successful and very productive plant and in the people who work there. I also want to point out that the Ellesmere Port enterprise zone and the cluster of businesses around it has been incredibly successful.

**Justin Madders** indicated dissent.

**Claire Perry:** The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but I am told by the head of the local enterprise partnership and the local council that it is, so perhaps he should consult a little more widely. I think that was a bit of low blow. This is about ensuring that we have the right support for the industry, that we have a thriving supply chain and that there are the best possible conditions for them to thrive and grow.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): It did not take PSA long to renege on the assurances about investment that it gave the Secretary of State just a few months ago. Does the Minister accept that the workforce and the trade unions, over three successive new model rounds, have done everything that has been asked of them by the company and have achieved a level of performance that exceeded previous levels? May I suggest that sending in DWP officials is not the response that the Government should be making now? There should be a strong, robust response from her own Department, telling PSA, “It's not on.”

**Claire Perry:** I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman that there has been an incredible level of performance by the people working in the plant. Indeed, Tony Woodley, a long-term member of the union from this plant who sits on the Automotive Council, just cannot speak highly enough about what has been achieved.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): To lose 400 of the 1,800 local jobs is devastating news for Ellesmere Port, but I am struggling to understand the reasons given by the plant's French owner, PSA. The Government have said that the UK automotive sector is the most productive in Europe, with 50% higher productivity than overall UK manufacturing productivity, and that last year saw a 17-year high in the number of cars built in the UK, yet PSA has said:

>"Current manufacturing costs at Ellesmere Port are significantly higher than those of the benchmark plants of the PSA Group in France."

How can the Government's statement be reconciled with the attitude of the French owners?

**Claire Perry:** I have not looked in detail at the operation and fixed-cost production, but I suspect that if the plant is running below full capacity—as we know it is—because sales are weaker than planned, the cost per unit produced...
will be higher. That is why, before we have any further conversations with the company about the long-term prognosis, we need to be clear that while there may be blips in sales of particular models, we want PSA and other auto companies to keep their investment coming to the UK.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Eighty per cent. of the cars produced at Ellesmere Port are for mainland Europe and 75% of the parts to make the cars come from mainland Europe. What assurances can the Minister give that, when we leave the European Union, there will not be additional customs checks or barriers to trade, because if there are, more jobs will inevitably be lost, not just at Ellesmere Port, but elsewhere in the car sector and in manufacturing more widely?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady and I are in complete agreement about the need for a frictionless and close relationship with the single market. However, I think that we would both welcome the fact that, since 2011, the value of parts that UK manufacturers source from the UK supply chain has increased from 36% to 41%. Of course, one of the opportunities for manufacturers is thinking about onshoring production that they would currently buy overseas. The hon. Lady and I want the best long-term outcome, but the Government want to make it clear that the supply chain is as supported as possible for the future, through the Brexit negotiations and beyond.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Minister reassure me that unfair or inconsistent application of the state aid rules is not putting British car manufacturing at a competitive disadvantage?

Claire Perry: I am happy to give those assurances. Everything we have to do needs to be put through the prism of state aid rules. We were one of the great proponents of a level playing field. We have always played by the state aid rules in a way that other countries perhaps do not. Everything that we do has to meet those tests. It does that and will continue to do so.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): When I negotiated in Government alongside the trade unions in the discussions with General Motors to save and then expand the plant, it was clear that the whole business model for Vauxhall car production—and van production at Luton—depended on the common standards in the single market and the common tariff in the customs union. Since the Minister cannot guarantee either, what equivalent measures will she put in place?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman knows that that is absolutely part of the negotiations, but we are considering one of more successful and vital industries, and the voices of those in the sector are heard loud and clear in my ears and those of the Secretary of State, and very publicly. If we want to protect the jobs and get the investment that means our children and our grandchildren will work in those plants, we must secure the best possible deal for UK car manufacturers and the UK economy.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Minister said earlier that the Government were standing by to help. She is correct: her predecessors in the job certainly stood by. When we asked for help with business rates and when colleagues across the House asked for help with energy costs, they stood by. For the good of all my constituents who work in the supply chain and directly for Vauxhall, will the Minister do a little better and commit to membership of the single market and customs union, which will keep them in their jobs?

Claire Perry: I admire the hon. Lady for speaking so passionately for her constituents, many of whom commute daily to work in the plant. She is more than welcome to come to any of the conversations we have with the auto industry about long-term investment here. We need to secure investment for the future because the whole automotive world is changing and pivoting away from diesel and petrol towards different forms of technology.

[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) talks about pivoting, but I am afraid that that is the way the world is going and I am determined that Britain will be at the forefront so that we can capture investment for the future.

Of course, the plant has reduced numbers previously, and then built up again. I gently point out that when it comes to practical help for those who might be affected and for whom this is clearly a worrying time, the LEP, the local council, the Department for Work and Pensions and Unite are ensuring that support is there and that people can find work quickly, if that is what they desire. There is also the talent retention scheme. We do not want to lose the skills that have been built up over the past 50 years for the industry and the country. It is vital that we work together to save those.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Over 450 of the people who work at Ellesmere Port live on the Welsh side of the border, only 12 miles away. I am pleased that the Minister has said that she is meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure in Wales, Ken Skates, to discuss that. Will she give a commitment today to ensure that he is involved in discussions about the three big issues, which are cost, the performance in Europe and the clarity that the company seeks from the Government about future membership of the single market and a tariff-free economy?

Claire Perry: The devolved Administrations are of course rightly involved in all those conversations. I was heartened today to hear the head of Cheshire West and Chester Council say that they were working closely across the border, because they understand that so many people working in the plant commute across the border every day. It is interesting that that is perceived as the economic area, which crosses the border. It is absolutely right that we should not let artificial boundaries get in the way. On the issue of artificial boundaries, all of us in this House want a thriving automotive industry. As we have done with other strategic decisions, the more that we are all on the front foot on this together—showing that we are the place for future investment, rather than taking lumps out of each other across the Dispatch Box—the better.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I would remind the hon. Lady that we are substantial net importers of motor products from the EU and especially of high-value-added components in the supply chain. Now that we are leaving the EU, will the Minister and the Government look to using state aid and public procurement programmes to benefit British motor manufacturing and Vauxhall in particular?
Claire Perry: I pay tribute to the many people who I am sure live in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency who work in the other major Vauxhall plant and who I know are as committed and productive as those in Ellesmere Port. He is absolutely right, and this is why we have to have the negotiation and why we have to come up with a good deal and ensure as seamless a relationship across borders as possible. He will know that 65% of the Luton plant’s production is exported to the EU. We want to make sure that continues.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) rose—

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! A sisterly contest. I call Maria Eagle.

Maria Eagle: Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is not helpful to call it a contest.

The Minister keeps saying that she wants frictionless access to the single market, but most of her colleagues in Government, in particular many in the Cabinet, are talking up the idea of leaving with no deal and walking out of the single market and the customs union. Given that the Ellesmere Port plant is weakened by going to a single shift and by losing skilled workers, as is inevitable, does she not understand that the general uncertainty caused by the lack of progress in the Brexit negotiations puts the plant at even greater risk in future of being fully and totally closed?

Claire Perry: I am not sure who the winner was in that contest, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right. She should not listen to the noises off, which people seem to be obsessed by, that are reported to come out of the Cabinet. There is an absolutely obvious view that we have to get a deal. We will get a deal that works for the UK and for businesses such as this in the UK, and we will have the opportunity over the next few days and weeks in the debate on the repeal Bill to show that we are unified on this and want to stand up for the businesses and those they employ in our constituencies.

Ms Angela Eagle: I have constituents who will be losing their jobs as a result of these extremely worrying announcements. The Minister has said that the Government are standing ready to help, but the future of the plant would certainly be enhanced if the plant were a front runner for a new model. What are the Government doing to ensure that it is?

Claire Perry: That is absolutely part of the conversation. I understand from listening to the general secretary of the union today and from talking to the company that decisions about the new model have to be taken in the next few years. It is incumbent on us all, therefore, to make sure that this is perceived as the best place to build that model. That is how to protect, preserve and enhance the jobs and productivity of the plant.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Many in my constituency will be devastated by the news of the threatened job losses at Vauxhall’s Ellesmere Port plant. In the Secretary of State’s statement on Nissan in Sunderland on 31 October last year, he said that the Government pledged to work vigorously with the car industry to ensure that more businesses and supply chains could locate in close proximity to major manufacturing sites by upgrading sites and providing infrastructure. There is huge scope for that around the Ellesmere Port plant. He also indicated that in the EU negotiations the Government would work to ensure that trade between us and the EU “can be free and unencumbered by impediments.”—[Official Report, 31 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 680.]

What progress can the Minister report on those two commitments?

Claire Perry: If the Secretary of State were at the Dispatch Box, he would stand by all those comments. The hon. Lady is right. The chief executive of the LEP was at pains to point out the opportunities available from working together within the enterprise zone at Ellesmere Port in terms of reducing energy costs, which I know the hon. Lady cares about, and enhancing the business environment. She is right, therefore, that local solutions can help with this problem. Fundamentally, however, we stand by, we want to support the company and the industry and we want to make sure that these investment decisions are made as quickly as possible.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I put it to the Minister, though, that she is still glossing over the broader context, particularly given that the chief executive of PSA has himself said that a key consideration in the long-term future of Ellesmere Port is “visibility” of the UK’s future trading relationship with the EU. Is that uncertainty not also filtering through to the car market in the UK, where new car registrations were down 9.3% in October and the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has said that economic and political uncertainty is a key consideration? Will she not accept what she has been told time and again—that ambiguous and contradictory messages from the Government about Britain’s future as regards the Brexit negotiations are making a bad situation still worse?

Claire Perry: I accept that ambiguity is bad for investment—that applies right across the sectors—and that is why we need a deal as soon as possible. I point out, however, as I did at the start, that when this company, and indeed all these European companies, look across their manufacturing bases, they will see that British workers in these plants are the most productive out, however, as I did at the start, that when this company, and indeed all these European companies, look across their manufacturing bases, they will see that British workers in these plants are the most productive in Europe. In the last 15 years, we have seen major investment in the industry, which is delivering both current and new models. It would be incredible if companies did not want to invest on that basis.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) said, the company’s statement makes it clear that uncertainty over our future relations with EU is jeopardising future investment in the plant. The Minister is a reasonable person—she was one of a small band of brave Conservatives to rebel during the article 50 process—so I ask her to acknowledge that the Government’s boneheaded determination to leave the single market and customs union is already costing jobs, livelihoods and prosperity up and down Britain.

Claire Perry: Just to clarify, the company’s statement about this change relates to sales of the model, which are not reaching its forecast potential, but that is something that, with the best will in the world, can always happen if a company gets the design or marketing wrong. The House has to work together to deliver the best possible
Claire Perry: I assure the hon. Gentleman that both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I hear the messages loud and clear from the auto sector and, indeed, from the business community as a whole—from businesses large and small. My right hon. Friend is assiduous in ensuring that the voice of business is considered in every aspect of the EU negotiations. That is what we have been doing. We continue to work on the best possible deal for Britain, and we will get behind it.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Last week it was Monarch, headquartered in my constituency. This week it is Vauxhall, headquartered in my constituency. Yet the Minister did not once use the word “Brexit” during her statement. Does she think that that is sending a message to would-be investors in this crucial industry?

Claire Perry: I was not at the Dispatch Box to answer questions about Monarch, but I understood that it was a very troubled company that was burdened with debt, and other airlines have reported record passenger numbers over the summer. The statement that we made last week about BAE Systems concerned the delay in landing some important overseas orders, and I hope that the House recognised how committed the Department was to ensuring that those orders were delivered.

Let me say again that this is not about Brexit. It is about a lack of sales of a model that is sold both in the United Kingdom and in Europe, which is having a near-term impact on the shift pattern at this port.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Chair. Let me begin by saying that I feel very much for the people and families who are affected by this announcement.

Earlier in the year, the Prime Minister sought reassurances about safeguarding jobs. Clearly that was all a bit “peace in our time”. This is not actually about petrol, diesel, electric or C-segment; otherwise, why has the plant in Gliwice, in Poland, not been affected by similar closures?

Carlos Tavares, the PSA chief executive, has said that it is hard to decide on the group’s strategy owing to a lack of clarity over the UK’s plans to leave the European Union. The jobs—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman quite understands. In these situations, what is needed is a short question, and the Chair—as the hon. Gentleman generously described me—needs evidence that a question mark will appear before long. It is not an occasion for a series of observations; it is a question to the Minister.

Matt Western: Thank you for clarifying that, Chair. [Laughter.]

Claire Perry: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman. I chair the Automotive Council for the Government. The council brings together vital representatives of the manufacturing companies that are based here and of the supply chain, as well as technology leaders and union representatives. I spend a great deal of time talking to representatives of the industry about what is affecting their businesses. This is exceptionally disappointing for all the families who may be having conversations over the tea table tonight, but it is due to a failure to deliver on the sales projections for the Astra. It is our collective job to ensure that the industry has confidence in the UK when it comes to investment in the future.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): As chair of the all-party regional group covering this area and former chair of the Automotive Council, I recently attended a Toyota event celebrating 25 years of production at the nearby Deeside plant, and the message coming from the automotive sector in connection with all different types of production is that the lack of clarity from the Cabinet and Government on this issue is undermining the sector. That is the clear message from the industry, and this Government need to get themselves in order. Will the Minister speak to the Cabinet to ensure that the united line she is talking about is conveyed to them?
**Claire Perry:** Forgive me, but the hon. Gentleman may be a bit behind on his facts. In March of this year Toyota announced a quarter of a billion pounds of new investment to upgrade its Burnaston plant in the east midlands. In July BMW announced that it will be producing the electric Mini here. These actions and investments are safeguarding thousands of jobs in our constituencies, and we should all be proud of that.

**Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** Foreign direct investment has fallen from a £120 billion surplus before the referendum to a £25 billion deficit after. Vauxhall is of course part of that figure. Does the Minister still think this is nothing to do with the disastrous Brexit negotiations?

**Claire Perry:** At some point we have to accept that we have to get through these negotiations, that the best way to do that is to show a unified face to Europe, and that the most important thing to do is secure the millions of jobs and the billions of pounds of investment we need to continue to grow. Frankly, it is a bit rich for the hon. Gentleman to be trying to make the case for the Government being divided on Brexit when his own Front Bench does not have a clue what its Brexit position is today, let alone yesterday.

**Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab):** The future of Vauxhall and every other motor manufacturer in this country depends on gaining the next model. What message does the Minister think her chaotic Brexit policy is sending to the people in the parent companies who are making those investment decisions today?

**Claire Perry:** My strong suspicion is that all auto companies are thinking about the future models being partially or fully electric, and about how they might introduce self or autonomous driving capabilities.

This Government have sent some pretty clear signals that we think that is the way we should go, partly for all the air quality benefits that brings. I think the hon. Gentleman should be celebrating the fact that this Government have committed a quarter of a billion pounds to the Faraday challenge, to get the next generation of electric vehicle technology together, and over half a billion pounds from the public and private sectors to make sure we lead the world in connected and autonomous vehicles. That is the future of the models in this country. The manufacturers understand that, and we need to get the investment to ensure that the jobs we are talking about today are protected.

**Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** I urge the Minister to redouble her efforts to support staff. PSA flagged up concerns over the competitiveness of this plant. Can the Minister explain how the competitiveness of this and other UK car plants, which rely so heavily on just-in-time production, will be maintained, let alone enhanced, post-Brexit, once more burdensome customs rules kick in, risking turning just-in-time production into never-on-time production?

**Claire Perry:** The right hon. Gentleman will have heard me say several times during this urgent question that that is exactly why we need to make sure we have the minimal amount of friction in terms of the supply chain. Indeed, the UK percentage of the supply chain is rising, which can only be helpful as it is much better for logistics. We should all pay tribute to something the right hon. Gentleman referenced: the incredible productivity and skill level built up by the people working in this plant, which we should all be focused on, and which is why Britain continues to be the best place for automotive investment. We have wonderful workers in this and other plants, and we want to be investing to support them in the future.
5.24 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Friday, I emailed the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union’s office at 12:08. The email was acknowledged by his office at 12:21. At 15:03 precisely, my letter was on the Guido Fawkes website. Mr Speaker, you may be aware of Guido Fawkes, and I am sure that he will get pleasure from the fact that I am mentioning his website here today, but could you explain how I can ensure that the Minister’s office is just as prompt in giving me a reply to my inquiry as it appears to have been in giving that inquiry to the Guido Fawkes website?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has raised his concern in a very reasonable tone, and I am grateful to him for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. I understand his concern and—all attempted jocularity aside—this is in fact quite a serious subject. The handling of Members’ correspondence by Government Departments is of course a matter for the Ministers concerned rather than for me, and I do not know how his email to the Department for Exiting the European Union found its way to a third-party website, but I strongly agree with the principle that Members of this House should be able to assume that their correspondence with Departments will be treated in confidence and with respect. It should not be lobbed in the direction of some website. That is a pretty extraordinary state of affairs and I would hope that the Secretary of State will at some point have something to say about the matter. The Secretary of State himself is a very long-serving and distinguished parliamentarian, and he treats the House with respect, so he might well have a view on the matter. I hope that we will hear that view sooner rather than later.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hope that this is a point of order that you can deal with. Yesterday, I drove into the House of Commons car park because I was going to do some constituency work. I pulled in, and next to my vehicle was a car being recharged. It was an electric car, and there is nothing wrong with that; it was also a foreign car. The problem is that it appeared to be a Labour campaign vehicle. It had “Labour” all over it, and it clearly did not seem to be a Member’s car. I understand that the Labour party has had some problems with parking at its new offices, but I do not think that it is correct, sir, that we should have its cars parked here. Is it perhaps the case that Labour is interested in the many paying for its electricity bill?

Mr Speaker: I am most intrigued by the point of order raised by the hon. Gentleman, for two reasons. First of all, I think he invests me with an immediate wisdom that I cannot claim to possess on a matter which, in the previous eight years and four months of my Speakership, has not been raised with me in this Chamber in that way. I am therefore bound to say that I must reflect upon the matter. Secondly, I am even more intrigued by the sense on the part of the hon. Gentleman that it is possible to distinguish a car that belongs to a Member from any other car. My car is a very ordinary car and I do not think that there is anything to suggest that it belongs to a Member rather than to some other person, but I will look into this matter. I hope that that provides satisfaction to the hon. Gentleman and of course, very importantly, to Mrs Bone.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier this afternoon, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) asked the Home Secretary an important question about why the Intelligence and Security Committee had not been reconstituted since the election, and indeed had not met since April. I do not think that she can have heard or understood the question correctly, because she did not give my hon. Friend an answer. This is incredibly serious—as I am sure you appreciate, Mr Speaker, as the champion of this place—because that Committee scrutinises the important work of the Government and the intelligence services. We have had a number of dreadful terrorist attacks and all sorts of allegations about Russian interference in our democratic process, and the Committee needs to get on with its job. Will you please ensure that my hon. Friend gets a proper response from the Home Secretary or the relevant Secretary of State? It is unacceptable for the ISC not to be doing its work for such a long time?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I certainly agree that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) ought to have an answer to the question that he did ask, rather than perhaps to one which he did not. If there was a failure to answer, I am sure that it was inadvertent rather than calculated. More widely, I point out to the House that the method of composition of the Intelligence and Security Committee is different from that of other Committees. It is a Committee of Parliament, but it is not a Select Committee, so it was not constituted in the same way or at the same time as the other Committees. However, its work is just as important and as pressing as the work of any of the Select Committees of Parliament, so I agree that it is important that it should be constituted and up and running as quickly as possible. This is a point that I am happy to mention to the Leader of the House myself, but I rather hope that Members who feel strongly about it might be inclined to raise the matter with the Leader of the House, perhaps at the upcoming business questions, at which time I eagerly anticipate that the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) will be in his seat and leaping up and down with enthusiasm from it.
Nuclear Safeguards Bill

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 9 October on Hinkley Point C, HC 393. Fourth Report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee of Session 2016-17, Leaving the EU: negotiation priorities for energy and climate change policy, HC 909.]

Second Reading

5.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is straightforward. It ensures that when the United Kingdom is no longer a member of the European Atomic Energy Community—Euratom—we will have in place a legal framework that meets our future international obligations on nuclear safeguarding. Nuclear safeguards demonstrate to the international community that civil nuclear material is not diverted into military or weapons programmes. It is important to be clear about the definitions in and scope of the Bill, because nuclear safeguards are distinct from nuclear safety, which is about the prevention of nuclear accidents, and from nuclear security, which relates to the physical protection of nuclear material. Those topics are subject to different regulatory regimes.

Our current nuclear safeguards obligations arise from our voluntary offer agreement—an additional protocol—with the International Atomic Energy Agency. The IAEA is the UN-associated body responsible for the oversight of the global non-proliferation regime. The first requirement flowing from the UK’s commitments on safeguards is to have a domestic system that allows the state to know what civil nuclear material it has, where it is and whether any has been withdrawn from civil activities.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Following conversations with the leadership of the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy, which is in my constituency, does the Secretary of State agree that their stance on Euratom is not about Euratom itself, but about knowing when all the details will be finalised?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend, who has a close connection with his constituents who work at Culham, is absolutely right. He knows that we are keen to agree the greatest possible continuity for the arrangements for research at Culham as soon as possible.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there is nothing in the Bill that will prevent us from seeking associate membership or arrangements with Euratom under article 206 of the existing Euratom treaty, and that it remains Government policy to seek to do so?

Greg Clark: I can confirm that the Bill has been prepared on a contingency basis. The discussions around our continued arrangements with Euratom and with the rest of the European Union have not been concluded, but it is right to put in place in good time any commitments that are needed in primary legislation. Euratom has served the United Kingdom and our nuclear industries well, so we want to see maximum continuity of those arrangements.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend has just confirmed that the Bill is necessary only because the Government have announced their intention to leave Euratom. I voted against the proposal when it was put to the House before the last general election, and I have yet to hear a rational reason for our leaving Euratom. As all our previously satisfactory arrangements for nuclear safeguarding are set aside, all our existing agreements with the IAEA are put in difficulty. Safeguarding is necessary to comply with the non-proliferation treaties, to which we apply a great deal of importance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman may be the Father of the House, but that does not allow him to make a speech when everybody else is waiting. He has more experience of this House than I will ever have, and he ought to use it.

Mr Clarke: Will the Secretary of State give an argument in favour of abolishing a satisfactory arrangement that has lasted for almost 50 years?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It might have been helpful if the right hon. and learned Gentleman had asked that question to begin with, rather than giving a speech.

Greg Clark: Triggering article 50 of the treaty on European Union also requires triggering article 50 on membership of Euratom. That is not just the Government’s view; it is the European Commission’s view, too. The Commission clearly stated to the European Parliament that, “in accordance with Article 106(a) of the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community, Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union applies also to the European Atomic Energy Community.” That is the basis on which we are considering these safeguards.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give an assurance that, as we leave the EU, the Bill will enable us to develop our own watertight system for complying with nuclear safeguards? As he says, that means introducing reporting and transparency to make it obvious that no nuclear material is going where it should not be going. We want assurances that all these boxes will be ticked, even if we leave Euratom.

Greg Clark: That is precisely the point of the Bill, and I will explain, perhaps at some length, the ways in which it might be done. I hope my hon. Friend will stay for that.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is being generous in giving way. We heard clearly enough that this is a contingency Bill. What I did not hear clearly is the Government’s policy on staying in Euratom. He says that the treaty requires us to come out, which is debatable. If it is the Government’s policy that we want associate membership status, will he make that clear now? Maximum continuity is a rather vague concept.

Greg Clark: It is very clear that membership of Euratom requires membership of the European Union, which is why we have this Bill. We have been satisfied with the arrangements we have, and part of the negotiation will be to ensure the greatest possible continuity, but that is to be negotiated with Euratom and the partners involved.
I have mentioned that the first requirement flowing from our commitments on safeguards is to have a domestic system that allows the state to know what civil nuclear material there is and where it is located, but the second fundamental principle of the global non-proliferation and safeguards regime is that there is some oversight of the system independent of the country itself. That provides obvious and necessary reassurance to the international community that material from civil nuclear programmes is not used otherwise than for civil activities.

The UK has been a member of Euratom since 1 January 1973, and Euratom has carried out elements of both the domestic and the international activities set out in our agreements with the IAEA. The UK’s agreement with the IAEA on safeguards is a trilateral agreement, reflecting the relationship between the UK and Euratom. Upon withdrawal from Euratom, however, the UK’s main agreements with the IAEA will become ineffective, as they are predicated on Euratom membership. We are in discussions with the IAEA to agree replacements that reflect the UK domestic regime, including continued international verification by the IAEA. The Bill gives us the ability to give effect to precisely that regime. We have been working closely with the Office for Nuclear Regulation to ensure it will be ready to take on responsibilities for nuclear safeguarding that are currently delegated to Euratom inspectors.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Many professionals in the nuclear industry and outside academics are seriously concerned about the ongoing problem of what to do with nuclear waste from the civil programmes. Will the new arrangements simply parallel exactly what Euratom is doing or will they be stronger? Is the Minister not concerned that we still have to deal with the serious problem of long-term storage of civil nuclear waste?

Greg Clark: Let me say two things. First, we want to see maximum continuity of the standards—we do not want any reduction in them, as they have served us well and they give confidence to the industry. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman knows, from his many years in this House, that successive Governments have taken forward our long-term disposal of nuclear waste, and work on a long-term repository is being conducted, but that is a domestic responsibility, as it always has been.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s approach. Will he confirm it will mean that all the operational work that happens in the relevant plants will continue as if nothing had changed? Is it done to a high standard and we wish to preserve those standards.

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I say, I do not think anyone regards the arrangements that have prevailed as deficient, so it makes sense to replicate them as we can. We are being orderly in making sure that we have the right domestic framework in place in good time.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) referred to the fact that we have to make all these international agreements which have previously been reflected in agreements between the EU and international bodies and other countries. Is any other country outside the EU objecting to the likelihood that we will be seeking to make these arrangements, or to be a full member of the IAEA in our own right, with a voluntary agreement that it proposes?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend will doubtless be aware that across the international community there is great recognition that there is little contention in this area. It is obviously in the global interest to have robust arrangements in place, and the discussions are taking place smoothly and without any contention.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on pursuing this issue with calm and decency. Will he take the opportunity to reflect on some of the scare nonsense that we heard earlier, particularly with regards to medical radioisotopes? That was front page—it was said that people would not be able to get their treatment—but nothing at all in our decision would ever stop the export of any of those medical radioisotopes to non-EU countries.

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is right; there is nothing in that at all.

Let me state it another way: the Bill enables the United Kingdom to set up a domestic safeguards regime to enable us to meet international safeguards and nuclear non-proliferation standards after we withdraw from Euratom, no matter what the outcome of the negotiations. So we are being prudent and prepared, taking these steps now, in very good time. The ONR does not currently have this role because, under the Euratom treaty, all members, including the UK, subject their civil nuclear material and facilities to nuclear safeguards inspections and assurance carried out by Euratom. Euratom then provides reporting on member states’ safeguards to the IAEA, which conducts nuclear safeguards globally. The United Kingdom’s new regime, established under this Bill, will ensure that the UK has the right regime in place to enable the ONR to regulate nuclear safeguards following withdrawal from Euratom—it could not be more simple. That will ensure that we, the UK, continues to maintain its position as a responsible nuclear state following withdrawal from Euratom.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State assure me that interested parties in the industry, principally the Nuclear Industry Association and Prospect, the trade union, which represents most workers in the industry, will continue to be consulted, as at the moment neither is convinced that the Bill is better than Euratom?

Greg Clark: I will certainly make that commitment. One feature of the nuclear industry is that it is, appropriately, highly consultative. People from across the sector talk to each other. It is a community of experts and they take advice. We will certainly continue to do that.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Nuclear Industry Association, with which I have meetings and with which the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) meets regularly. The NIA has said clearly that the publication of the Bill “is a necessary legislative step in giving responsibility for safeguards inspections to the UK regulator”.

"is a necessary legislative step in giving responsibility for safeguards inspections to the UK regulator".

I have been clear with the House that the Bill is a prudent and timely set of measures that does not prejudge the discussions we will have with Euratom. I regard it as a model of good order.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab) rose—

Greg Clark: I give way to the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Rachel Reeves: The Secretary of State says that he speaks regularly to the experts in the sector and industry; can he give an example of anybody in the industry who would prefer the powers to be transferred to the ONR rather than for us to stay in Euratom? Is there anyone?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady justifies what I said at the outset. The arrangements we have had with Euratom have been perfectly satisfactory, and we want to see maximum continuity. I hope she would agree, though, that it is necessary and prudent to take legislative steps so that if we are not able to conclude a satisfactory agreement—I do not expect that—we nevertheless have a world-class nuclear safeguarding regime. I would have thought she would welcome our doing that in good time and sensibly.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The decommissioning of the UK’s ageing nuclear estate is a critical aspect of Euratom’s work, yet there is not a single mention in the Bill of decommissioning. Will the Secretary of State explain how the 17 nuclear sites that are currently in the process of decommissioning, including Trawsfynydd in my constituency, will be regulated and properly staffed and have the necessary expertise if the UK leaves Euratom?

Greg Clark: There is no difference in the arrangements. As I say, the Bill makes provisions for a safeguarding regime. It is not about safety or security; it is about making sure it can be verified that nuclear material that is used in the civil sector does not cross to other uses. The robust arrangements supervised by the ONR that we have in place for decommissioning continue.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), the Secretary of State said that Ministers regularly meet various industry experts and bodies. Will he go further and say that by the time the Bill is enacted it will contain a clause that says it is necessary to consult the industry as widely as possible? The trade unions and the trade bodies currently feel left out.

Greg Clark: Such consultation is the universal practice in the nuclear sector. The hon. Gentleman might serve on the Bill Committee, so perhaps he will be able to interrogate the issues he raises, but at every point the nuclear sector proceeds not through the unilateral fiat of Governments but appropriately, on the basis of expert advice. That is the culture of the nuclear industry and it will continue.

As I set out for the House in my written statement in September, our intention is for the new domestic regime to exceed the standard that the international community would expect from the UK as a member of the IAEA. The objective is for it to be as robust and comprehensive as that currently provided by Euratom. We are perfectly satisfied with the high standards that have prevailed under Euratom, so we do not want to take the opportunity to weaken them. As I have mentioned, we will also be agreeing new safeguards agreements with the IAEA. My officials have had meetings with officials from the IAEA at their headquarters in Vienna to take the discussions forward, and I am pleased to report that they are progressing extremely well.

On other aspects of the Euratom relationship, we have made it clear that we want to continue the successful co-operation. In June, I announced the Government’s commitment to underwrite the UK’s fair share of the costs for the Joint European Torus—the leading nuclear fusion facility in Oxfordshire—which supports 1,300 jobs, and we will continue to do that.

Let me briefly take the House through the clauses of the Bill. It is not a long Bill, as the House knows. Clause 1 amends the Energy Act 2013 to replace the Office for Nuclear Regulation’s existing nuclear safeguards purposes and with a new definition. The ONR will regulate the new nuclear safeguards regime using its existing relevant functions and powers, so the measure is about clarifying its purposes. Clause 1 will also amend the Act creating new powers so that we can set out in regulations the detail of the domestic safeguards regime, such as on accounting, reporting, and control and inspection arrangements.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Nuclear Industry Association has made it absolutely clear that this legislation is necessary, but it has also spelled out that the best outcome would be for the UK to continue with some form of membership of Euratom. Will my right hon. Friend give the House an idea of whether he feels that the discussions so far with Euratom make it likely that we will be able to achieve some form of continuation of the existing arrangement?

Greg Clark: As I have made it repeatedly clear, we regard the arrangements with Euratom as having served this country well and we want to see maximum continuity. As far as I can see, all members of the nuclear industry regard that as being the case. This is a good example of where I hope it will be possible to agree quickly and with a maximum of consensus a regime that continues the high standards that we have observed.

John Woodcock: As the Secretary of State is of course aware, there is an extended search to find a new investor in the NuGen site. Potential buyers are looking on that with great interest. In his closest possible working with Euratom—or whatever his phrase was—is there a scenario in which there will not need to be new nuclear co-operation agreements, which could make the sale much more complicated and problematic?

Greg Clark: The fact of this legislation should send a signal to the world that we are absolutely determined to be forward facing and to make sure that we have a regime in place that can continue the high standards that we enjoy while pursuing, in negotiation with Euratom and with other countries, the same continuity of arrangements that we have enjoyed. I see absolutely no obstacle to that.
Clause 2 will create a limited power, enabling regulations to amend the Nuclear Safeguards and Electricity (Finance) Act 1978; the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2000; and the Nuclear Safeguards (Notification) Regulations 2004. This narrow power will mean that cross references in that legislation to existing agreements with the IAEA can be updated once new international agreements have been reached.

Let me summarise the four key points. We are totally committed to the current and future prosperity of the nuclear industry. It is an important part of our energy future, our security as a nation and our commitment to clean energy. We are committed to meeting all our international obligations and to retaining our world-leading status on nuclear research and development. We need the powers in the Bill to give the existing independent nuclear regulator—the ONR—a new role to regulate nuclear safeguards, alongside its existing role regulating the UK’s nuclear safety and security.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way one more time. I am not sure whether he is coming to an end, but he has not yet responded to the intervention on radioisotopes of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). Does that mean that the Nuclear Industry Association, Dame Sue Ion, the honorary president of the National Skills Academy for Nuclear, and the Royal College of Radiologists are right to express concerns about the future possible supply of radioisotopes, especially given that, in the past, there have been global shortages? The Euratom supply chain was prominent in managing those shortages of supplies.

Greg Clark: Radioisotopes are not in scope of the measures before us today; this is about safeguards; and I replied perfectly adequately to my right hon. Friend. The Bill sits alongside other work streams around our future relationship with Euratom, with the International Atomic Energy Agency and with third countries, and as such has been drafted to cater for a variety of possible outcomes to these talks. I want to reiterate our commitment to maximum continuity of these arrangements. The reason we are leaving Euratom is the decision to leave the European Union. The two treaties are uniquely legally joined. We continue to support Euratom and want to see a continuity of co-operation and standards and a close future partnership with it.

We do not know what the final arrangements will be, so we are doing what any responsible Government would do by putting in place now a civil nuclear safeguards regime for the United Kingdom through this Bill so that we will be fully prepared whatever the outcome of negotiations. I commend this Bill to the House.

5.55 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): As the Secretary of State has outlined, this Bill will provide the legal framework for establishing a domestic nuclear safeguards regime. Nuclear safeguards are essential obligations to ensure that work and materials for civil nuclear do not get transposed into work or preparations for military nuclear, and that is done under the umbrella of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Arguably, the UK already has a perfectly good set of nuclear safeguards through its membership of Euratom, so why is the Bill needed?

The Bill is a contingency measure, as the Secretary of State has helpfully illustrated. If we are to leave Euratom, and if there is no associate membership that gives us continued nuclear safeguards provisions, we will need to put in place a new system of safeguarding, and that needs to be to the satisfaction of the International Atomic Energy Authority. Now that takes us into rather strange territory: we have not yet left Euratom; it is not clear whether we have to leave Euratom; the House has not agreed that we should leave Euratom; and we have not put in place any parliamentary procedure for agreeing that we should leave Euratom. In effect, the Bill is based wholly on the declaration that the Prime Minister made in her letter to the EU informing it that we were going to invoke article 50—

Greg Clark: Is the hon. Lady saying that it is wrong for this House and this Government to prepare, in a prudent and orderly way, to maintain the excellent safeguards that we have? Is she somehow criticising that preparedness?

Rebecca Long Bailey: Clearly, the Secretary of State was not listening to what I was saying. If he displays some patience, he will hear a bit more about my thoughts on the Bill’s contents.

Euratom was agreed to as a body and a treaty before the EU treaty came about, and to that extent it is, arguably, separate from the actual formation and operation of the EU. That of course is the subject of fierce legal debate. It is true that its disputes mechanism does involve the European Court of Justice, and its terms include the free movement of scientists but those are specifically applied to civil nuclear activities and do not stray on to a wider canvas. Subject to legal debate, it certainly may have been possible—

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right that it is debateable whether, legally, we have to leave Euratom. Would it not be helpful if the Secretary of State published the legal advice that he has obtained? As a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I have heard a number of experts saying a number of things about this very matter.

Rebecca Long Bailey: It certainly would be helpful for the House to hear about the discussions that have been taking place between the Government’s legal advisers and the Government. The Library has helpfully provided a number of solicitors who have disputed the point that the Secretary of State puts forward. There is legal discourse going on that disputes the fact that Euratom and the EU are intrinsically linked.

John Redwood: Does the hon. Lady remember the long debates on the article 50 letter and the legislation to approve it? It was made very clear in those debates that we would probably have to leave Euratom at the same time and that we would therefore plan on that basis. She and many of her right hon. and hon. Friends voted for the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill knowing that.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I earlier urged the Secretary of State to display a little bit of patience. If the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) did the same, he might hear some of the answers he requires in the remainder of my contribution.
Subject to legal debate, it certainly may have been possible—had the Prime Minister not taken the unnecessary step of specifically including Euratom in her letter to the Commission—to retain the UK’s membership of Euratom. At worst, we could have secured a close association with Euratom that was good enough to allow the continuation of nuclear safeguarding within that amended framework.

The Opposition believe that continued membership of Euratom or a close associated status with it is possible and necessary for the efficient, continued working of a whole raft of procedures relating to the nuclear industry, not just safeguarding. We see this procedure of starting to set up identical but separate processes, instead of a relationship with Euratom, very much as a last resort or a back-up measure. We are frankly disappointed that the Government seem to be putting rather more effort into this than into seeking to maintain an arrangement with a body that does all this perfectly well, although the effort put into this Bill is also questionable. I will come to that in due course.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman would do well to keep up. I have mentioned several times that there is a current legal discourse regarding this very issue. Perhaps he should refer to that.

Robert Neill: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will just make some progress, if I may.

We have to be clear that the measures set out in the Bill are just a part of the process of disentangling ourselves from Euratom and replacing its provisions with satisfactory alternatives that allow the UK’s nuclear industry to continue working smoothly in conjunction with its international partners and not to face a cliff edge of uncertainty. Indeed, the position paper on the nuclear industry issued by the UK Government in the spring of this year lists a number of key activities of Euratom that are not covered by the nuclear safeguarding issue, but which are essential to place into a UK legislative framework if a tenable regime for nuclear power in the UK is to be created before Brexit.

One example is that we will need to reach an agreement on the international supply chain for nuclear reactors. Without such an arrangement in place, it is possible that the existing nuclear power stations such as Sizewell B will be forced to close until such time as the agreement is sorted out. The UK will need to conclude individual and separate nuclear co-operation agreements with non-EU countries such as Australia, Canada, Japan, South Africa, Kazakhstan, the United States of America and others. We will need to agree new inspections with the IAEA. The status of supply chains such as nuclear isotopes for medical treatment will need to be maintained, supplied by reactors in EU countries. There is the issue of research in nuclear technology including, importantly, the fusion research carried out at the Joint European Torus facility in Culham, which the Secretary of State has already mentioned. These are all at serious risk if a fully worked-out series of agreements is not in place to allow these activities continuous operation. Working out a way to honour our safeguarding commitments under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty is only the start of the process and we should not delude ourselves that achievement of that solves the Euratom issue. It does not.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The hon. Lady’s position seems to be that there is legal uncertainty about whether it is necessary for the UK to leave Euratom and that we should have left the issue until further in the negotiations, finding out whether we were leaving later on in the process. Would that not have just left rather less time to prepare if we did have to leave?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The point I am making is that there is legal uncertainty. Sadly, the Prime Minister firmly closed the door on the Euratom position, when it could have been left open. We could have passed this Bill through Parliament while questioning whether the legal position on Euratom membership was as the Commission states.

Mr Duncan Smith rose—

Robert Neill rose—

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con) rose—

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will make some progress, if I may.

The Government stated in their notes on the Queen’s Speech that the Bill to be introduced on the future of safeguarding would also “protect UK electricity supplied by nuclear power”. This Bill clearly does not do that, which is perhaps why that claim has been dropped from the description of the Bill. But the challenge centrally remains, and it is likely that another Bill will be necessary to protect that electricity in its entirety. Will the Minister confirm when that legislation will be introduced?

Let us assume for the time being that maintaining membership of Euratom is not possible—by far the worst case scenario. How have the Government chosen to implement their limited stab at replacing the nuclear safeguarding regime? Well, they have chosen to do so by giving the Secretary of State all the power to make the changes. The Bill contains powers for the Secretary of State, by order, to provide all the detail and fill in the dots of the legislative changes without further meaningful recourse to the Floor of the House.

Clause 1 will give the Secretary of State powers to introduce substantial amendments to the UK’s safeguarding procedures and give effect to international agreements that are yet to begin being negotiated without any further primary legislation. Furthermore, the Secretary of State will be given the power—also by order—to amend retrospectively, and without further meaningful recourse to the Floor of the House, no fewer than three pieces of existing legislation. Not only that, but he will have the power to amend those pieces of legislation, as the Government acknowledge in their explanatory notes accompanying the Bill, based on the outcome of negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency that the Government accept are not complete.
We have to take on trust that the negotiation with the IAEA to which Parliament will not be a party will proceed satisfactorily, and that the Secretary of State, in his infinite wisdom, will table the necessary amendments to primary and secondary legislation that will give effect to those agreements, whatever they are. While I am on this point, will the Secretary of State confirm the progress of such agreements and negotiations, and provide details?

**Greg Clark:** I hope the hon. Lady will be reassured if she actually reads the Bill. It is clear that the power to amend the legislation that she pointed out—I hope that she can see what I am pointing out—is limited to “consequential, supplementary or incidental provision…transitional, transitory or saving provision.” It is not a general power. It is intended to ensure that the transposition of one set of regulations to another can be made efficiently.

**Rebecca Long Bailey:** Let me take the Secretary of State on a little journey. If he listens carefully, he might see how dangerous the scope of certain parts of the Bill might be. The explanatory notes indicate that regulations under clause 1 will be subject to the affirmative procedure only “on first use”. It would be helpful if he confirmed that that wording is actually a terrible mistake, that he only “on first use”. It would be helpful if he confirmed that wording is actually a terrible mistake, that he only “on first use”. It would be helpful if he confirmed that that wording is actually a terrible mistake, that he does not actually mean it and that, at the very least, all legislation on the domestic safeguarding regime will be subject to the affirmative procedure.

I would never cast aspersions on the Secretary of State, but, unfortunately, his ministerial colleagues have shown that they are prepared to use their delegated powers not just to avoid parliamentary scrutiny, but arguably to legislate in open defiance of the House. In particular, I refer to the recent rise in university tuition fees. The original Act allowed any statutory instrument raising the limit to be annulled by either House. Unfortunately, the Government first prevented any vote whatever, and then refused to accept the vote of the House against the regulations. In effect, they used secondary legislation to rule by ministerial decree. They tabled the regulations the day before Christmas recess and the Opposition tabled a prayer against them on the first sitting day after that. But, despite the conventions of the House, the Government dragged their feet for months until eventually conceding the point and scheduling a debate on 18 April. Of course, the Prime Minister dissolved Parliament before that vote could be held. After the election, the new Leader of the House said that there were “no plans” to allow time for the vote that her predecessor had solemnly promised from the Dispatch Box. It was left to my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) to secure parliamentary time under the rules of Standing Order No. 24. In that debate, the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation tried to deny that any vote had been secured, leading Mr Speaker to intervene and tell the House:

“I had thought there was an expectation of a debate and a vote, and that the Opposition had done what was necessary.”—[Official Report, 19 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 895-6.]  

**Tom Pursglove:** To return to the substance of the Bill, which is about contingency, will the hon. Lady confirm that at 10 o’clock tonight the Opposition will vote against that contingency?

**Rebecca Long Bailey:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but we are talking about very important arguments regarding the machinery of this House. If he will let me conclude my remarks, he might learn something very important.

Eventually, we had to use an Opposition day motion to revoke the regulations. The House agreed to it, only for the Government to refuse to accept the result after telling their Members to boycott the vote. When the Government say that Parliament still has a say on delegated legislation, there is a catch, and it is a Catch-22: they can refuse time for a vote within the 40 days and then say that it is too late for any vote to count once that deadline has passed. The Bill includes a power to amend primary legislation. The Government want us to trust them with the powers of Henry VIII when, to be frank, they behave like Charles I.

On the Brexit process, we have had long lectures from Government Members about parliamentary sovereignty, but Ministers have shown in practice that they will deny and defy this House. It is ironic that, just weeks ago, the Brexit Secretary was keen to assure us that no such thing could happen in legislation such as that under discussion. He told the House:

“Secondary legislation is still subject to parliamentary oversight and well established procedures. In no way does it provide unchecked unilateral powers to the Government.”—[Official Report, 7 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 357.]

Even as he was saying that, his colleagues were refusing to follow those procedures, rejecting parliamentary oversight and using exactly those unchecked, unilateral powers to force higher fees on students.

The Bill will give the Government similar powers. We know that they will use secondary legislation not just for technical details, but to make controversial and important policy decisions by the stroke of a ministerial pen.

**Mr Duncan Smith:** The hon. Lady is going on and on, as is her wont, about the Government not giving the Opposition enough time or opportunities to vote against their proposals. There will, however, be a vote tonight on this Bill, so will the Opposition vote for or against it?

**Rebecca Long Bailey:** I am sorry that I am boring the right hon. Gentleman, but if he listens to the rest of my contribution perhaps his question will be answered at the end. Perhaps that will keep his attention.

The job of a legislature is to legislate. The Bill is effectively a blank cheque handing that job over to Ministers. I hope that the Minister will give an iron-clad guarantee that the Government will not use those powers in that way and an ultimate guarantee to change the Bill itself. Safeguards are vital for our nuclear industry, but they are needed for our parliamentary democracy as well.

The Bill’s Henry VIII clauses are particularly worrying, for the simple reason that if the Secretary of State does not use the powers effectively, the UK will simply not have a nuclear safeguarding regime. Our legislation book is scattered with such clauses that have never been enacted, so either the status quo ante prevails or some new primary legislation renders the power irrelevant. That is not the case, however, with the Bill, because if the regime is not fully established into UK law on exit day, it will not work.
The point is not only that the Secretary of State may introduce such legislation, but that they have to introduce it; otherwise the regime will not work. The Government are, in effect, asking us to trust that they will do the decent thing and make it work, while conceding that the Secretary of State may not, if he or she wishes, actually do it. That certainly does not look very good from the outside looking in, because there is no status quo ante to go back on in the event that the legislation is not properly translated into UK law. We will just fall of a cliff, as we depart from our membership of Euratom.

For all those reasons, it is evident that this barely fit for purpose Bill will, at the very least, need substantial amendment even to make it work on its own terms. Indeed, we also need a wider consideration of how the UK’s advantages and protections under Euratom can successfully be replaced in a national context.

We are clear, however, that, should all else fail, of course we need a nuclear safeguarding regime for the UK post Brexit—[Interruption.] I am pleased to get cheers from Government Members. But let me add a caveat: we will need to see evidence of substantial amendment to the procedure set out in the Bill, as well as evidence that the Government are really thinking about the best post-Brexit Euratom formulation, before we can wholeheartedly commit to agreeing to the passage of this Bill on Report and Third Reading.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I say to Members that, if they speak for about eight minutes, everybody will get equal time?

6.16 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about this important Bill, which is the first step to picking up the pieces from our withdrawal from Euratom. I am also grateful for the numerous briefings I have received from the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington). He is an extremely assiduous Minister and I cannot go anywhere, least of all the Tea Room, without being stopped by him to be briefed on clause 3(3)(b).

The Secretary of State has already outlined the Bill’s purpose and the benefits we have gained from being members of Euratom, which is, in effect, the single market for the nuclear power industry. It allows us to move nuclear material between member states and, importantly, to move nuclear scientists, many of whom have moved to Culham, live in my constituency and contribute to the leading role that Britain continues to play in nuclear research.

Everyone in this House knows that the Government do not want to leave Euratom. The decision to leave is a case of, “It’s not you, it’s me.” Euratom is collateral damage from Brexit. Clever lawyers—we have not seen the legal advice—have decided that we have to leave Euratom because of the article 50 notice and it is extremely unhelpful, unfortunately, that the European Commission agrees with them; otherwise we might have had a fighting chance of persuading the Government to reverse their decision to withdraw from Euratom. I cannot help thinking that some such decisions are made slightly on the hoof. I only knew that we were withdrawing from Euratom on the day on which the article 50 Bill was published. It is quite hard to keep up with Government decisions on the issue, so I hope that from now on they will give us a heads up in plenty of time with regard to their decisions as we withdraw.

It is clear that the Bill deserves the House’s support, because it will transfer the safeguarding regime currently undertaken by Euratom to the Office for Nuclear Regulation, in preparation for our withdrawal. It will allow the ONR to monitor fissile material in the UK, to make sure that it is in the right place and being used for the right purpose.

Of course, that is just a small part of Euratom’s work. As Members’ interventions and, indeed, speeches have already highlighted, we need clarity on numerous other areas. The Secretary of State mentioned the very important nuclear co-operation agreements between Euratom and other countries around the world. The agreements allow us to trade in those nuclear markets outside Europe, including Australia, USA, Ukraine and numerous others. Clearly, we will have to replace those nuclear co-operation agreements with those individual states. Indeed, in some of those states, in particular the United States, it is a matter of law that they cannot trade with a country that does not have a nuclear co-operation agreement with them. Clearly, that issue is of the essence.

Secondly, we need—this phrase has been used in many cases with regard to Brexit—to replicate what we already have. In this instance, we need to replicate the common nuclear market that already exists because of our membership of Euratom. That is absolutely vital. Given the transfer of knowledge between highly skilled individuals, I do not think that anyone would object to nuclear specialists being able to move freely between countries and, indeed, to settle in countries where high-powered nuclear research—no pun intended—is being undertaken.

Thirdly, what comes out of our membership of Euratom is our leadership in nuclear research. Culham is a very serious project that has attracted hundreds of millions of pounds of investment through the Joint European Torus project. We were successful in ensuring that the next phase of JET, ITER—the international thermonuclear experimental reactor—will be based in France, despite talk of its being moved to Japan at one point. It is clear that Europe, partly because of the UK’s expertise, maintains its leadership in this regard. Following ITER, there will come another project, DEMO, which will be the first working nuclear fusion power plant: a demonstration plant—the clue is in the name. We were in pole position to get that in the UK, but I very much doubt, regrettably, that that will happen now.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has referred to numerous trips to Vienna—a beautiful city—to talk to the International Atomic Energy Authority. He has hinted that progress has been made on the voluntary offer safeguards agreements—an additional protocol that we will need with the IAEA in future. I look forward to further discussions with him on that. I have already talked about the need for new co-operation agreements with the United States, Australia, Ukraine and others.

The issue of isotopes has been raised. The Government have made it clear that they do not regard isotopes as fissile material that is therefore within the scope of Euratom.
However, I remind my right hon. Friend that there was in the past a crisis in isotope supply. We must remember that we do not create our own isotopes in this country because we do not have the right nuclear reactors, so we have to get them from our European partners. In fact, Euratom was there to step in when that crisis arose. In 2012, when the supply crisis happened, the Euratom Supply Agency specifically extended its remit to cover the supply of isotopes. It would be interesting to know what our relationship with the Euratom Supply Agency will be as we move forward.

I return to Culham and the fusion budget. I am pleased that the Government have made it clear that they will continue to fund Culham until 2020 regardless of whether that money is part of Euratom or otherwise. However, it is again worth pointing out what enormous benefits membership of Euratom has brought to British industry. Some 40 British companies are working on the next project, ITER, with £500 million-worth of contracts. I am sure that they will be maintained, but it would be good to hear reassurances that they will be. I stress that British scientists played a really key role in ensuring that ITER happened in France and not in Japan.

Then there is the question of whether the Office for Nuclear Regulation has the capacity to undertake the responsibilities it will be given in the Bill. As I understand it, eight members of staff at the ONR currently work on safeguarding, and about 40 Euratom staff do so. Incidentally, for those of us in this House who routinely refer to bloated European bureaucracy, I was interested to note that Euratom has only 160 staff, about 25% of whom work on safeguarding. Clearly, some financial support will be needed. The grant from the Government to the ONR is actually going down. Understandably, emphasis has been put on the nuclear industry funding the ONR, but it is a pity that the grant—admittedly it is very small, in the single millions—is being halved at precisely the time when new responsibilities are being put through in statute.

We now understand that the Government’s position on Brexit as a whole is to see a transition period. I cannot keep track of how long it will be, and who is in favour of it and who is not. I am in favour of the longest possible transition period—perhaps a couple of hundred years. [Laughter.] It would be delightful if we could get from the Minister some indication of whether the Government are thinking about a potential transition period as we leave Euratom so that we can remain members for a couple of years after we formally leave.

We will clearly have to look at associate membership of Euratom. However, nobody should be under any illusions that associate membership is something that we can take off the shelf. Switzerland and Ukraine are already associate members, but for very specific issues, mainly to do with nuclear research; they do not have nearly the same benefits that full Euratom membership brings. Therefore, yet again, we will be seeking a bespoke, special and close relationship with the single nuclear community otherwise known as Euratom.

6.25 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is woefully typical of the approach of this Government that despite their intention to abandon Euratom, this Bill falls significantly short of dealing with vital issues for the UK’s nuclear future. Without any confirmation of a transitional deal, Ministers have left a host of unanswered questions around nuclear safety. The nuclear industry, the medical profession, our research sector and universities—virtually everyone associated with nuclear power or related supply chain industries—have asked for the answers to those questions. Breaking the news to Parliament that we will leave Euratom in a line of the Bill’s explanatory notes shows wilful disrespect to them.

It also betrays an all-too-common disregard for the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, because while safety is reserved, areas of regulation are devolved. That regulatory role is just part of why the Scottish Government must be involved in discussions over Euratom as things move forward.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Do we not have to be very careful about our terminology? The Bill has absolutely nothing to do with safety standards as in the prevention of nuclear accidents—it is about safeguarding, which has an altogether different legal meaning. Is it not very important that we do not scaremonger about this?

Drew Hendry: It is very important that the unanswered questions are dealt with in this insufficient Bill—[Interruption.] Well, a lot of people will be concerned about the implications of what is not covered in this discussion, some of which I intend to cover.

With regard to nuclear safety, it is critical that we continue membership—or, at the very least, associate membership—of Euratom. Falling back on WTO rules could risk the UK breaking international law. It will come as no surprise that we in the SNP believe that the safest nuclear power policy is no nuclear power. We are determined to deliver just that.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I am going to make some headway.

In Scotland, we are already showing what can be achieved by renewable energy. New storage solutions for renewables are developing further access to the vast potential from offshore wind and tidal, meaning that an abundance of low-cost, clean energy will be generated. In contrast, this Government continue to chase the folly of new nuclear such as the white elephant that is Hinkley C, leading to exorbitant costs for consumers and leaving yet another burden for future generations to clean up—and that is if there is no more immediate crisis caused by failure or deliberate act leading to nuclear incident. I also wonder what care and attention has been given to people in Wales, as only days ago it came to light that about 300,000 tonnes of radioactive mud—a by-product of this Government’s nuclear obsession—is to be dredged and moved to Wales. I will leave that to hon. Members from Wales to debate further.

My constituency is in the highlands, which is not only the natural home of much of our renewable generation and its potential, but home to Dounreay. It is a place where the impact and long-term costs, both financial and environmental, of nuclear are well known. Those costs should not be repeated. The Minister pointed out that the responsibility for domestic nuclear safety resides in the UK, but that does not mean that the UK has a good record, especially prior to EU membership.
Indeed, most of us living in the area can recall the various worrying nuclear material scares, and we are well versed on the dangerous radioactive levels recorded on Caithness beaches.

Each scare should remind us of why our membership of Euratom is so important—because while they can never be perfect, agreed EU directives over safety have been essential in ending some of the hair-raising practices in the UK nuclear industry. Who could forget that in 2006 the remains of actual plutonium rods were found on the beach at Sandside, in Caithness? Hon. Members earlier mentioned watertight provisions, but one retired Dounreay worker who was interviewed at the time spoke of a catalogue of errors, accidents and bad procedure, including claims that workers commonly disposed of radioactive material in the sea at night to avoid it having to appear on official documents. He told a reporter that he once saw a man “using a Wellington boot tied to a piece of string” to take test samples “because the proper equipment had rusted” beyond use. Mr Lyall, the retired worker who spoke out, had been a plant supervisor for many years.

Although the UK Atomic Energy Authority—as it would—denied that Mr Lyall’s claims were true, it did admit:

“There were practices from the 1950s to the 1960s that we would not repeat today.”

Those practices occurred before we were members of Euratom. In the same statement, the UKAEA told reporters:

“Standards have risen in health and safety and environmental protection, and government legislation has also been tightened considerably.”

Our membership of the EU, and especially of Euratom, has had a positive impact on the improvement of the standards that the UKAEA spoke of. In Scotland, although we are working towards a nuclear-free future, we have to maintain safety at existing facilities during that process, and we must plan for a future of standards that the UKAEA spoke of. In Scotland, has had a positive impact on the improvement of the

Mr Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, but he highlights the fact that we have not seen that legal opinion or any indication that it is watertight. We should have the opportunity to see it; perhaps it will be forthcoming as a result of this debate.

Mr Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No. I am going to make some progress.

As I was saying, in Scotland, although we are working towards a nuclear-free future, we have to maintain safety at existing facilities. The current challenges exist in the other nations of the UK; indeed, they are multiplied by this Government’s obsession with pursuing costly and dangerous new nuclear. That obsession has put nuclear at the heart of energy strategy, while the Government’s other obsession with hard Brexit would see them leave the very agency that oversees the security of markets, businesses and workers in the sector. To most people looking on, that is baffling and dangerous. To us, it is yet another day in the growing chaos of this Tory Government.

Leaving Euratom serves no purpose other than to put at risk standards that have been in place for many years. Hon. Members do not even need to take my word for it. The Nuclear Industry Association has said:

“The nuclear industry has been clear that our preferred option is to seek to remain part of EURATOM, and that the UK government should negotiate this with the European Commission. The industry in both the UK and Europe want to maintain the same standards as apply now, and have worked well for more than 40 years. Without access to Euratom’s NCAs and common market, the nuclear new build programme, nuclear operations and the decommissioning mission could be seriously affected.”

Everything that can be done must be done to mitigate the risk of any incident, the effects of which would be measured in millennia. Failures in nuclear safety and decommissioning carry a potential catastrophic impact so great that our closest eye and the very best and most up-to-date research are required to avoid such outcomes.

Tom Pursglove: For the very reasons that he has just alluded to, will the hon. Gentleman confirm whether the Scottish National party will support the Bill at 10 o’clock tonight: yes or no?

Drew Hendry: What we would support is a sensible approach to maintaining either full or associate membership of Euratom.

The European regulator oversees nuclear matters as diverse as plutonium storage and medically vital radiotherapy supplies. For example, our membership of the Fusion for Energy programme allows the UK to receive contracts. So far, the UK supply chain has been awarded contracts worth £500 million, and that would have been expected to rise to at least £1 billion. Leaving Euratom seems to serve no purpose other than to satisfy this Government’s hard Brexit mantra.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there seems to be a rigid consensus among Conservative Members that we cannot stay in Euratom if we leave the EU, and that they refuse to accept that legal opinion on the matter is divided? Does he agree that it is utterly incumbent on the Secretary of State to explore this divided legal opinion to see whether the UK can, indeed, stay in Euratom?

Drew Hendry: I agree that there are clearly unanswered questions about the legal position, which has not been challenged, exercised fully or even debated to any degree. Not only are our safety standards, research opportunities and business at risk, but we may see the most dramatic and negative effects of any withdrawal in the medical field.

Mr Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Drew Hendry: No, I am going to make a bit of progress.

In its paper on radioisotopes and Brexit, the Royal College of Radiologists outlines the crucial role that radioisotopes play in medical advances. The majority of the UK’s supply of radioisotopes, used in scanning and the systemic and internal treatment of a wide range of cancers, is imported from Europe and further afield. The most commonly used radioisotope is used in 700,000 medical procedures each year, and global demand is growing by 0.5% a year. Radioisotopes are used for the diagnosis and treatment of various diseases, including cancers, cardiovascular conditions and brain disorders. The UK does not have any reactors capable of producing those isotopes, and because they decay rapidly—often within a matter of hours or days—hospitals in the UK cannot stockpile them and must rely on a continuous supply from reactors in the EU.

Mike Wood: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the isotopes he refers to are not special fissile nuclear material, and so they are not regulated by international safeguards such as these and would not be affected if we left Euratom?

Drew Hendry: It is telling that Conservative Members are willing to ignore all advice from experts in the nuclear industry in order to uphold their position that we must have the hardest possible Brexit.

Kit Malthouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I am going to make some progress.

As I have said, the UK does not currently have any reactors capable of producing such isotopes.

Greg Clark: Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman. Euratom places no restrictions whatsoever on the export of medical isotopes, and so there are no further protections needed. It is irrelevant.

Drew Hendry: I do not think that the Minister is reflecting the view of the experts in the industry who are affected, and I will come on to underline that with some quotes.

Euratom supports the secure and safe supply and use of medical radioisotopes. If and when the UK withdraws, it will no longer—this is the critical point—have access to Euratom’s support, ending the certainty of a seamless and continuing supply. The Royal College of Radiologists points out that the supply of radioisotopes would be disrupted by leaving the single market, because transport delays will reduce the amount of useful radioisotopes that can be successfully transported to their destination.

Kit Malthouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I am going to make some progress.

As I pointed out, radioisotopes decay within hours or days of production. The most common isotope has a half-life of just 66 hours. The consequences of a disrupted radioisotope supply was made clear not only during the incident that the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) mentioned, but during the channel tunnel fire in 2008. That led to a reduction of the availability of radioisotopes, and to cancelled procedures. So, for patients, there can be no no-deal scenario. Such a scenario is a ludicrous proposition with regard to leaving the EU; as practitioners point out, however, in relation to medical isotopes it is a matter of people’s very lives.

Leaving Euratom will increase the difficulty of maintaining nuclear fuel in the longer term and threaten research funding into medical isotopes.

Kit Malthouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, because I am going to conclude.

Most concerning of all is that leaving Euratom has the potential to reduce standards of protection for workers and the public. Since the UK Government have committed to a nuclear future, it would be pushing their irresponsible actions to critical levels if they were to forsake membership or, at the very least, associate membership of Euratom. Until there is no nuclear in Scotland—on our land, or in our waters—we should have the right to remain a member of it.

6.40 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is abundantly clear, especially from the Westminster Hall debate secured by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), that Euratom is intrinsically entwined with our membership of the European Union. Legal advice says that, as does the Commission itself. That has been abundantly expressed during this debate, and no doubt it will be expressed again on many other occasions.

The tone of the Westminster Hall debate, and the contribution it made, was fantastic. Unfortunately, some aspects of the issue, as we have heard today, are actually a little more disturbing. The way the debate is going on medical isotopes—radioactive isotopes for cancer and other medical treatments—has been extraordinary, given that it is absolutely clear that this does not form part of the Bill. The impact of leaving Euratom will not be to stop people receiving such cancer treatments.

Albert Owen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for referring again on many other occasions.

Chris Green: I appreciate the broad consensus in the Grand Committee Room, but not everyone had an opportunity to speak in that debate. No doubt there will be a transition period of some sort, but whether we have an associate membership or just a very close association at the end of it—like the association we will have with the European Union—we will look at what the EU does and how it goes about things, and we of course want similar standards. We are not looking to leave the European Union and then to reduce and cut all kinds of standards.

Drew Hendry: Will the hon. Gentleman advise us what kind of transition he would propose?
Chris Green: We are very early on in the negotiations, and I am sure the Minister for Climate Change and Industry and the Department for Exiting the European Union will look at that.

The extraordinary aspect of this debate is that some people are saying we will go off a cliff edge and valuable radioactive isotopes will no longer be available. What does that suggest about our friends in the European Union—that they will no longer sell these products, or that they will choose not to allow those products to be sent over to the United Kingdom? It is extraordinary to suggest that such sales will cease.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that is not about the EU wanting to give us radioisotopes, but about half-lives? The radioisotopes we are talking about have extremely short half-lives, so any delay at all at the border means fewer patients will be able to benefit from them.

Chris Green: Yes, I understand that some half-lives can be as short as six hours, so the efficacy of the isotopes will diminish in an incredibly short period. However, to say that the European Union and the British Government are not fully aware of that and that getting such materials from Europe over to the United Kingdom cannot or will not happen is extraordinary.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patricia Gibson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Green: I have already given way on this issue.

It is absolutely extraordinary to suggest that these materials will dry up overnight. Clearly, we are going to have a good relationship with the European Union and there are going to be sales of these products.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that implying that the Bill will have an impact on the supply of medical isotopes is shameful scaremongering that could deeply upset and distress seriously ill people in this country?

Chris Green: Absolutely. I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. As has been highlighted, 500 medical procedures a year, involving 10,000 people in the United Kingdom, depend on these products, yet we hear that they are going to be withdrawn and taken away, or that they will be held at the ports.

Rachel Reeves: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Green: No, I have already given way.

That is an extraordinary thing to suggest, and since this is outside the scope of the Bill, it is clearly scaremongering.

Rachel Reeves: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Chris Green: No. I am going to make some progress.

As we leave the European Union, we want to continue research relationships with it on many projects. We will see through Horizon 2020 to the end, and we must consider what kind of relationship we will have on the successor programme—framework programme 9. We need a close relationship with the European Union on Horizon 2020, but we must also consider what relationship we need or want on framework programme 9, and we must be mindful of the direction of travel with the European Union.

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the period beyond 2020. All things being equal, this Parliament, being a fixed-term Parliament, will last until 2022. Should the Government not already be signalling how much money they will put towards future funding?

Chris Green: There will be an ongoing consultation on the relationship the university and scientific sector in the United Kingdom wants on the successor programme. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will know, Horizon 2020 really focuses on top-end research—the things that we often do very well in the United Kingdom—which is why this country has a disproportionately large share of the Horizon 2020 money. On the successor programme, however, the moneys may be directed towards capacity building, which would favour other regions of the European Union more and the United Kingdom less. We must look into that and watch the direction of travel in the European Union. This is not set in stone, and we should not think that the successor programme to Horizon 2020 will merely “cut and paste” what we have today.

My big concern about where we go from here, post-Brexit, is the migration to the United Kingdom of European Union citizens and people from across the world who want to take up jobs in the nuclear industry. There is a huge opportunity in this, post-Brexit, for trained and qualified staff who currently work in Euratom to come across and work in the United Kingdom or for us to recruit and bring in people from across the world. Once we leave the European Union, we will have an opportunity to set the skill requirements we need in this country.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting points. I have consulted the powers that be in my constituency, where I have two universities, and there is concern about the consequences for science of ending the free movement of labour, certainly in relation to the specialists who come in to help train people. Experts very often come from Europe to teach science and technology, and there is concern because if we do not get this right, those people may well not be available for those universities.

Chris Green: That is a fair point, and why we have to ensure that we have as close a relationship as possible, consistent with having left, with the European Union post Brexit. Universities will be one of the prime sectors that the Government look to to ensure that we have that co-operation. It is such an important sector for the UK.

When thinking about who we need in the UK, people often focus on the highly qualified—professors, lecturers and so on—and the technicians that universities need can be overlooked. They are often paid significantly less, but we need them to come over, too.

Finally, will the Minister comment in the winding-up speech about arrangements for co-operation with countries outside the EU, such as the United States and Canada?
Rachel Reeves: I do not think that anybody debated or considered leaving Euratom, or voted to leave it on 23 June 2016—

Kit Malthouse: I did.

Rachel Reeves: Except the hon. Gentleman. However, we are where we are, and the Government have made their decision. I urge them not to abandon what I and many hon. Members regard as a sensible approach: to pursue a transition period during which we stay under Euratom’s auspices, and then seek some sort of associate membership so that we do not have to recreate everything that the Minister and others have said that we value from our membership.

I understand the need for the Bill. There is a risk that we could crash out of the EU and Euratom, and we need a back-up, given that the Office for Nuclear Regulation will take on the responsibilities that Euratom has today. Unlike trade, there is no fall-back option for nuclear. With trade, we have the World Trade Organisation, but with nuclear, if we do not have an arrangement with the IAEA, we will not be able to trade or move nuclear materials around the EU. The Bill is an important belt-and-braces measure in case we crash out, which I hope does not happen, but is a risk.

The Bill does part of one thing—pass the remit for safeguarding inspections from Euratom to our regulator, the ONR. As hon. Members know, the ONR is not new, but there are serious pressures on its capacity. It is currently recruiting a new chief nuclear inspector, and only last week the Government had to put aside more money for it as part of the clean growth strategy. We therefore know that the ONR is under pressure even before taking on the new responsibilities that the Government may pass on to it. As a senior ONR official was forced to admit to a Select Committee in the other place, the timescale for adding safeguarding responsibilities is “very challenging”.

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend is making an important point about the ONR’s resources. Indeed, it takes about seven years to train the experts to ensure that they are competent enough to do the work. The lack of resources means that we really need a transitional period.

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge. He led the Westminster Hall debate and has a constituency interest. He is absolutely right, and some of the questions I will pose later are about how we can be sure that the ONR has the capacity and the capability to take on the responsibility that the Government will pass on to it.

The Bill does not resolve all the safeguarding issues. It does not solve the difficulties associated with the common nuclear market that exists as part of the Euratom framework, and it does not put in place the nuclear co-operation agreements with other countries that we would require to enable trading and even the exchange of information between nuclear states. It does nothing to resolve the arrangements to continue the world-leading fusion research, funded by Euratom but located in Oxfordshire, as the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) pointed out. I know that Members who represent those communities have real concerns about the impact. When I visited Culham a couple of weeks ago, it was made clear to me that those working there would prefer to stay in Euratom and had serious concerns about our exit.

Despite what some hon. Members think and say, the Bill does not provide the assurance that radiographers and others have sought for months from the Government that medical radioisotopes, again not made here, can be seamlessly transported to the UK for diagnostics and treatment. No one in this Chamber can say with certainty what will happen in March 2019, and whether agreements will be put in place for the frictionless movement of goods and services. Without that, we cannot be certain that those radioisotopes can come into this country easily and without hindrance.

Given that list, it should not be a surprise to Ministers or the House that my Committee—the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—has launched an inquiry into the impact of the Government’s decision to leave Euratom. The House will also not be surprised to learn that a lot of detailed and concerning evidence has been submitted to us. As well as my visit to Culham and the Joint European Torus—JET—I was at Hinkley Point today, meeting representatives from Hinkley Point C. Again, concerns were expressed to us about ensuring that nuclear fuel can get into the country once we have left Euratom. Ministers should be mindful of that.

Let us be clear: the process of ceasing to be part of Euratom, if that is what we end up doing, is complex, time consuming, and relies on good will, negotiation and agreement with third parties. Ministers cannot simply say that we will get those arrangements—they are up for negotiation. The Bill is just one small part of that complex picture, and as Ministers know, there is a very limited timeframe to get a series of agreements with a range of third party states to replicate what already exists as part of the Euratom framework.

My biggest concern about the Bill as it stands is that although it provides for permission to transfer the responsibility for safeguarding, it leaves to a later date all the arrangements that need to be made to ensure that the ONR can carry out those new functions. It leaves it to Ministers to determine them, at an undetermined time—increasingly a feature of the Government’s attitude to this as well as other aspects of the process of disentangling the UK from the EU. That is worrying, and should concern every Member of this House. Parliament should be involved because the decisions made here will affect all our constituents.

If we consent to the Bill as it stands, and transfer authority from Euratom to the ONR, it is important that we are confident in the arrangements to effect that change. We must be confident that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) said, the ONR has enough qualified and relevantly experienced personnel, because this is a specialist and skilled task, to do the job. Given that it is currently done and has been done for decades by another organisation, we must be confident that those people have had the right training, that the equipment required for monitoring special fissile material—by inspection in person and remotely—is in place, and that we know that the IAEA, the international body responsible for safeguarding standards, is satisfied and confident that this can be done effectively.
[Rachel Reeves]

However collegiate or conciliatory Ministers are during the Bill’s passage, and I know that they will be, they cannot provide those assurances to Parliament today, or any time soon, and they have no way of knowing whether the conditions will be met. It is a very big gamble, and frankly, it is unacceptable to say, “Don’t worry, it will all happen through regulation and we will deal with it later; we have a very good relationship”. It is Ministers’ and the Government’s responsibility to provide Parliament with the assurances, detailed information and confidence on this matter, and all those aspects of replicating what we currently benefit from as part of Euratom.

In the context of the Bill and what needs to happen in addition to it, there are several questions that need answers before Members can be convinced that the Government’s course of action—their choice that we go our own way rather than negotiate for a transition period and associate membership—is correct. When can Ministers tell the House more about the terms of any agreement with the IAEA? It has been suggested that standards will be broadly equivalent to those from which we benefit now. What does “broadly equivalent” mean? What is the difference between what we currently have and what the Government are seeking to get from the IAEA? When will the voluntary offer be agreed, ratified and confirmed by the IAEA? What measures do the Government have in mind to ensure that the Office for Nuclear Regulation has the right skills and resources in place, given how long it takes to train a nuclear safeguards inspector and the skills shortages that already exist in the sector?

The Minister knows well that many experts in the field are concerned about the decision to leave Euratom. Since its inception, Euratom has helped to facilitate trade, promoted key research and development programmes, allowed for the movement of skills and maintained high safeguarding standards. While nobody in this House would demur from the absolute requirement that safeguarding inspections happen, or from the need for the ONR to have powers from this House if it is to understand that role, the Minister must realise too that, notwithstanding that position, many questions remain unanswered. I hope a better way forward can be found—transition and associate membership, not a risky and costly process of transferring powers to the ONR for something that by its very nature relies on international co-operation, agreement and trust.

7 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am grateful and very pleased to be here as the first brick is placed into the strong foundation that we will be building for a post-Brexit Britain. This is the first real piece of legislation enabling us to see what it will look like. I congratulate the Minister on the Bill’s brevity and concision. Hopefully that pattern will be repeated.

I welcome the Bill and indeed our leaving Euratom, as I said earlier, although I recognise that many will not. Warm has been the embrace of Euratom for the past 40-odd years. Much has been achieved, in both research and safeguarding standards, but in truth the mourning bell has been tolling for Euratom for some time, because it is clear that the EU is turning its face against civil nuclear power. Germany is phasing it out by 2020, in a decision taken a couple of years ago, while Belgium, in a decision taken by our friend Mr Verhofstadt when he was Prime Minister, has decided to phase it out by 2025. Italy and Denmark have already made nuclear power generation illegal. Greece and Spain are phasing it out. Austria—ironically, as the home of the IAEA—has made it illegal even to transport nuclear material across its territory, such as its antipathy to it.

Given that the aggressively anti-nuclear Green party peppers Parliaments across the continent and has 51 seats in the European Parliament, serious questions need to be asked about the future of Euratom and its funding. When we recognise that much of the Horizon 2020 funding, which will go towards nuclear research, is generated by Germany, which will not be using the technology invented under that programme, we have to ask how long Germany will tolerate the notion that it should be pouring hundreds of millions of euros into nuclear research.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): My hon. Friend clearly knows a lot about this subject, so on a point of information to illuminate the House, what does he think about the French attitude to nuclear power?

Kit Malthouse: As I was about to say, in truth, Euratom is the French. It is anchored around France, with its 58 reactors, and they are the only serious nuclear player among the EU 27. The UK is second and Ukraine, although not a member—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) pointed out, it is now a special associate of Euratom, as it were—is third. Nevertheless, we now have the opportunity to look strategically at where our civil nuclear is going, what global alliances we should have, the direction of Euratom and EU nuclear research, and whether there is a better way.

Vera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the future of nuclear is still very uncertain? If the Romans had invented nuclear power, we would still be guarding our nuclear waste sites.

Kit Malthouse: I absolutely think that nuclear waste is important, particularly to us in this country. That is why we should have total control of it ourselves and not be reliant on a series of countries that will perhaps not even be willing to put money into researching how to dispose of, or reprocess or otherwise use nuclear waste.

We have been members of the IAEA since 1957. We have the capability to make the change; indeed, there is a strategic argument that the Office for Nuclear Regulation would be much better served if it had responsibility for all three of the civil nuclear strands—safety, security, and regulation and safeguarding. We lead the world in safety regulation; we can lead the world in the other two.

Mr Vaizey: I am immensely enjoying my hon. Friend’s speech, not least as I have discovered that the one person in the country who went to the polls on 23 June specifically to get us out of Euratom also happens to be a Member of this House. It is a remarkable coincidence. If I may probe his argument, does it not have a weakness, in that if he is saying that so many members of the EU want to undermine civil nuclear power, is this not precisely the wrong time for the Brits to leave the French to themselves? Does he also agree that, regardless of his attitude to Euratom, we will still have to go through an incredible number of hoops to recreate what we have benefited from?
Kit Malthouse: No, I completely disagree with my right hon. Friend. This is not the wrong time; it is exactly the right time for us to recognise that there is a world beyond the EU in terms of nuclear research. There has been much angst in the House already about nuclear scientists being able to travel freely, but I would point out that they do actually exist outside the European Union. There are lots of them in Japan, Korea, China and elsewhere. Indeed, the leading edge of nuclear research and the development of civil nuclear power is elsewhere. As I have said, we are dealing with a community of countries that are turning their back on this technology. Even if we get to the holy grail of fission, and we manage to get fusion going from the great reactor in my right hon. Friend’s constituency, the Germans will not use it. They have said already that it is of no use to them. The idea that they will continue to fund it into the future is fallacious.

Mr Vaisey: I am always further intrigued by the arguments of people such as my hon. Friend, who imply that we could do nothing outside Europe when we were members of Euratom. However, we got the Chinese to invest in Hinkley while remaining members. How did our membership prevent us from co-operating with other nuclear states?

Kit Malthouse: It has not prevented us, but we now have the opportunity to recognise that the nuclear community is global. While Euratom has served its purpose thus far, the point I am trying to make is that the trend of European opinion is very much against nuclear, so those countries are unlikely to continue pumping the money into Euratom that it has hitherto enjoyed. That is why we need to look elsewhere. It is perfectly possible for us to have a bilateral relationship with France. We have one on nuclear defence at the moment, which was signed in 2010; we can do the same on power. There is absolutely no threat to our participation in some of the global research programmes, such as the one at Culham and the ITER in the south of France, which currently includes Korea, China, Japan and Russia. There are lots of ways in which we can be involved.

My message today, I guess, is that people have to learn that Euratom cannot be part of project fear. It must not be part of project fear; it is far too strategically important to us not to reach out to the rest of the world. I am quite happy for us to have an associate membership, if that is what is required, but there is a world beyond the EU, and we have seen that in medical isotopes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) said, no one is pretending that we will not be sent medical isotopes when we come out, but that points to a strategic problem because of our membership of Euratom: we should be manufacturing those isotopes here. Why have we not got a reactor that will create them? We have the largest agglomeration of life sciences research on the planet, yet we do not have this feather in our cap—this piece of the jigsaw. Notwithstanding the SNP’s antipathy to nuclear, perhaps we should build that kind of reactor in Scotland, given that thousands and thousands of Scots benefit from medical isotopes every year.

The argument about Euratom has exposed the strategic nature of nuclear to us, in defence, civil nuclear and medical, and allows us now to think more coherently about which way we go. Civil nuclear is an international effort. Regulation should be at international level, as should partnership, so that we can finally find the holy grail of fusion power, which will solve our power generation problems well into the next century.

7.9 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—[HON. MEMBERS: “Why?”]—because he at least made an argument, unlike some previous Conservative Members, whose speeches were filled with vapid nonsense about how everything would be wonderful. His argument, however, was essentially: the Germans are coming and we need to pull up the nuclear drawbridge.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend’s precise point was that the Germans had retreated and left the field of civil nuclear energy. So the hon. Gentleman has drawn exactly the wrong conclusion.

John Woodcock: I tried to listen carefully.

I have some sympathy with Ministers. I am reminded of Dora Gaitskell in 1961 when she turned to her husband Hugh, that great leader of the Labour party—

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Those were the days.

John Woodcock: Don’t tempt me!

Hugh Gaitskell had just turned on its head his previously strong support for the EU by saying that joining Euratom would be like reversing 1,000 years of Britain as an independent state, and Dora said to her husband, “All the wrong people are cheering”. The Minister has had enthusiastic endorsements not only from the hon. Member for North West Hampshire, who belongs to the new generation of hard Brexiteer, but from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who I saw leaping to his feet enthusiastically, and others. He needs to look around at who his friends are on this and push much harder for the view that we might speculate is his own personal view—that the course the Government have set is potentially deeply damaging for the nation, for civil nuclear power and, as I will come to, for many workers in my constituency and far more in that of the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison).

The Bill is a hastily constructed life raft. Labour Members are not against life rafts—some of us have of late considered them in other circumstances. They might sometimes be necessary, and we will engage constructively in Committee to improve this hastily and poorly constructed life raft, but we should not be seeking to bail from the nuclear ship at all, as is currently the Government’s policy. I asked the Secretary of State two important questions—he was generous in allowing me to intervene on him twice—but to my mind he answered neither. The Minister might do so now or in his summing up if he wishes. First, is it the Government’s policy to negotiate a transition agreement beyond 2019, so that the cliff edge we are currently facing recedes at least by a few years? Secondly, are the Government seeking associate membership, which would negate the need for a whole new set of nuclear co-operation agreements?
I know that Ministers are inclined to put on a brave face, but still I must note the level of optimism coming from the Dispatch Box. The Minister will know better than me that the civil service is bursting at the seams trying to deliver the panoply of new treaties and arrangements that Brexit is forcing on the country. It is at best highly doubtful that there will be the capacity in the system at our end to put together a whole new set of comprehensive NCAs to alleviate the problem by 2019, and that puts at risk not only the current generation of civil nuclear power stations but the future generation.

Since the Minister took up his job, he has been engaged privately, like his predecessors, in trying to rescue the NuGen deal, which, if it goes ahead, will create up to 20,000 jobs in Copeland’s local economy. Several hundred of my constituents already go up the road and coast every day to work at Sellafield. We are talking about thousands more jobs, but that deal has potentially been damaged by the uncertainty around the post-Brexit arrangements—not only the final outcome but the Government’s intentions now. That uncertainty might deter this vital new investor, which can keep those 20,000 jobs on track in our local economy and help the UK to keep the lights on.

The situation is deeply worrying. I realise that many current and future Ministers will not have wanted to be in this situation, but they have some agency and could be clearer with the nuclear industry and other nations watching about where exactly they want to end up. That is the responsible way to safeguard jobs in our local area.

7.16 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), with whom I share a passion for nuclear energy.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in an important debate that is crucial for my constituency. Fellow Members will have heard me speak previously of the world-class nuclear skills in my constituency, of its internationally celebrated safe ways of working and of the challenges my community is overcoming in dealing with the world’s most complex nuclear legacy clean-up. Sellafield and the supply chain are world leading in this field. Sellafield is Europe’s biggest and most complex nuclear site and has been central to the UK’s nuclear development right from the beginning.

The UK established the world’s first civil nuclear programme, with the opening the first nuclear power station in my constituency at Calder Hall, which was first connected to the grid in 1956 and officially opened by the Queen. It was the world’s first power station to generate electricity on a commercial scale and operated for 47 years until it closed in 2003. The International Atomic Energy Agency was formed in March 1957 to support civil nuclear collaboration across the globe, and again we were world leaders in its formation. It is critical that we continue to benefit from being part of the IAEA and Euratom after we leave the EU.

Since being elected in February, I have visited both of Copeland’s nuclear licensed sites, Sellafield and the Low Level Waste Repository, to see for myself the incredible work done there by humble but highly skilled workers—scientists, engineers, tradespeople, those working in quality assurance and the enormous support operations. Sellafield has changed considerably since I worked there 20 years ago. I should declare an interest, as my husband, father and brother all work at Sellafield or in the nuclear industry—but then so do more than half my constituents, either directly or indirectly.

I have visited over 70 of the nuclear supply chain companies operating in my constituency. From global household names such AECOM, Arup, Atkins and Ansaldo NES to the more bespoke, locally grown, niche businesses of Delkia and REACT Engineering. Ansaldo NES to the more bespoke, locally grown, niche businesses of Delkia and REACT Engineering. From global household names such AECOM, Arup, Atkins and Ansaldo NES to the more bespoke, locally grown, niche businesses of Delkia and REACT Engineering.

The UK has a robust and well-established civil nuclear industry—but then so do more than half my constituents, either directly or indirectly.

The nuclear industry is important to note that Euratom currently has no safeguarding inspections from Euratom to the ONR. It must be right for the UK’s interests. However, it is essential to have a plan B, which is what the Bill provides.

As we leave the European Union, the Bill is a much-needed step that will potentially give the Office for Nuclear Regulation the necessary powers to take up and continue the role that about 40 Euratom officials currently undertake, if that is required. I understand that there may well be a potential for the United Kingdom to remain part of Euratom, or to become an associate member if an agreement can be reached that is mutually beneficial and suits the UK. Switzerland and the UK show that there is a precedent, but a deal of this kind must be right for the UK’s interests. However, it is essential to have a plan B, which is what the Bill provides.

The Bill seeks to transfer the responsibility for safeguarding inspections from Euratom to the ONR. It is important to note that Euratom currently has no impact on the management and safety of the UK’s many nuclear sites, which are solely the responsibility of the ONR, guided by UK policy. Of course, our policies reflect agreed international standards, and our standards are extremely high. There is no reason, in my opinion, that a similar set-up could not exist in respect of Euratom. The UK has a robust and well-established civil nuclear safety regime, which will not change if all the necessary steps are taken to ensure confidence and continuity throughout the transition stage.

The Government’s decision to withdraw from Euratom is a key concern for many businesses in my constituency and for those working in the nuclear industry throughout the UK. We need to ensure that, if we must leave Euratom, we have bilateral agreements beyond the EU. Foreign investment and knowledge are fundamental to the continued use and development of modern nuclear power plants. We need only look at Hinkley Point C to see an example of international knowledge and skill-sharing and, of course, an example of foreign investment. Any investor or developer requires confidence and continuity, particularly when the stakes are high. As a member of Euratom, the UK enjoys the benefits of several nuclear co-operation agreements, negotiated by Euratom on behalf of its member states. Trade agreements with many countries including Japan, South Africa and the...
USA allow the sharing of knowledge, personnel and components. We must not allow ourselves to lose that international co-operation.

Although the Bill is a good and necessary first step, even as a precautionary measure, more needs to be done to address and replicate the other aspects of Euratom, and to determine how we can ensure continuity in all the areas for which Euratom membership currently provides. While the transfer of responsibility from Euratom to the ONR seems logical, it is essential to ensure that the ONR has the necessary budget and is able to recruit appropriately skilled staff within the required timescales. I remain concerned about the Government’s intention to reduce the grant for the ONR. I fear that that would have a serious impact on the organisation’s ability to complete its current tasks, let alone perform its increased duties after Euratom withdrawal. That needs to be addressed.

I commend the work of the Minister and his Department. They have been very generous with their time when dealing with concerned Members such as me. The Department has obviously noted the difficulty, and the importance, of ensuring that there is a smooth transition if membership, or associate membership, of Euratom is not possible. Let me also recognise the work of the Prospect union and the Nuclear Industry Association in helping their members, and me, to understand the needs of the industry, and that of the many businesses who have contributed their concerns and suggestions in their efforts to get this right.

I must make it clear that not getting this transition right—not putting the right arrangements in place and doing so in time—would be catastrophic, in many ways, for my constituency, for the nuclear sector, for research and development, for science, industry and advanced manufacturing, for apprenticeships and our legacy of world-class skills, for jobs, for growth and for keeping our country powered up. It would be catastrophic for our country and for other countries, too. I know—this is just one example—that the skills, experience and innovative equipment of Copeland’s businesses are a vital part of the clean-up operation at Fukushima in Japan.

For decades, the thermal oxide reprocessing plant at Sellafield has processed waste from other countries, safely and efficiently. THORP is generating about £1 billion annually for the UK. The processes of separation, encapsulation, vitrification and compaction to deal with complex decommissioning challenges have been perfected at Sellafield, at the Low Level Waste Repository and throughout our supply chain, and the time is right for exporting more of those skills, the knowledge of processes and the innovation of equipment. Our future is and should be bright if we get this right, but everything depends on appropriate and timely arrangements.

Let me end on a note of caution. Like other Members who appreciate the importance of this industry to our country, I will not accept being pushed off our pedestal of internationally respected nuclear excellence. Without the replacement provisions in place, if we have to leave Euratom, we will fall not only from that pedestal, but right off the cliff in March 2019. The Bill is therefore vital, if only as a plan B. I am pleased to have been able to speak in the debate and to commend the beginning of the process. Negotiations and agreements must be made swiftly, with rigour and robustness, and with the support and agreement of Members on both sides of the House.

7.25 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As many Members have already pointed out, the Bill should not be needed at all. The most sensible approach to nuclear safeguarding would be for the United Kingdom to remain a member of Euratom, rather than wasting vast amounts of time and money in setting up an alternative regime that the Government admit will be as much a replica of the original as possible. The Government have created a rod for their own back by insisting that the European Court of Justice and freedom of movement are red lines. I wish they would just admit that is the problem, rather than hiding behind legalise and unpublished, disputed advice.

As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), when most people voted on 23 June 2016, the vast majority did not even know what Euratom was, let alone how to pronounce it. It remains possible that Britain could have taken the option of remaining a member, and it is a political choice to withdraw from it before that has been absolutely set as the legal position. What I am sure of is that the fallout—pun absolutely intended—of this decision leaves a huge gap not only in the country’s ability to safeguard nuclear material, but in many other areas not covered by the Bill.

We are told that the Government will seek a new treaty to replace Euratom, so the Bill is applicable only in the event of Britain’s crashing out of the EU and Euratom with no deal. No deal would be deeply disastrous for Britain, and the Government should not even be considering that option; yet here we are, about to pass a Bill to authorise spending on just that eventuality. Let us give credit where it is due. Given the importance of this issue and the Government’s own lack of confidence in themselves, the Department is doing absolutely the right thing in preparing for the worst—and yes, the Liberal Democrats would vote for the Bill on Second Reading. However, the fact that the Government have produced the Bill so early in the Brexit process shows that they must be genuinely concerned by the complexity of the task ahead and the possibility that the negotiations will fail.

By the way, as we all know, we have not even started those negotiations, and industry experts tell us that it could take up to seven years to negotiate a treaty as wide-ranging as Euratom. Although I have enjoyed listening to the jolly assurances of some Conservative Members—I, too, am an optimist by nature—I fail to see how we are going to do this in time.

Like many other Members who have spoken today, I am gravely concerned about the limited scope of the Bill and the fact that it does not cover the full range of Euratom functions. In particular, I am worried for my constituents. At one time, Abingdon had the highest number of PhDs per square kilometre in Europe, and many of the scientists still work on the Joint European Torus—JET—in Culham. The United Kingdom is world-leading in that area. Fusion technology, if achieved at scale, would be tantamount in technological terms to putting a man on a the moon—it is that revolutionary—and it would be a criminal act to put that position in jeopardy, but that is exactly what we are doing. To ensure its future, we need guarantees about the next phase of the work programme by the middle of next year, months before the Brexit negotiations are completed. This is very urgent.
This is not just about money, as we will, I am sure, be told: to fully participate, we must ensure that these scientists can move freely and collaborate fully and, furthermore, that those already here are enticed to stay. These are the best minds in the world, and I need not remind the Government how rare they are. It is all very well saying that we want them to stay, but we need to give them more certainty than that; they are already leaving.

My constituents, alongside others in the industry, are extremely concerned about the implications of Government decisions on their futures. What kind of associate membership do we want? Will the Minister publish, and consult on, proposals for dispute resolution? Will he guarantee freedom of movement of specialist and technical staff in the nuclear industry? There is far more information that we need from the Minister about these and other areas, and it is worrying that this Bill is so limited in scope.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** Is the hon. Lady seriously suggesting that there would be any circumstances in which well-qualified nuclear professionals would be prevented from coming into this country? Does she think, plausibly, that that is an outcome we might get to?

**Layla Moran:** I absolutely do, because we have not had that absolute cast-iron guarantee. I should add that this is not just about the nuclear scientists; it is also about all the support staff who are needed.

**John Woodcock:** My concern is that, as we know, world-class nuclear scientists are a rare and valued commodity, and some nations might not see it as in their interests to open the doors and allow greater exits of people whom they want to keep. It suggests a potentially slightly naïve view of the world to think that everyone will just say, “Yes, go to Britain; it will all be fine.”

I will be brief about this, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I forgot in my speech to ask for the leave of the House: unfortunately, a family illness means that I am not going to be present for the wind-ups—but in any case Labour does not seem to be voting against.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I let the hon. Gentleman make a long intervention when I realised that there was a point that he wanted to make. I just want to make the point that this does not create a precedent for long interventions, as it was a special case.

**Layla Moran:** On funding, the haste with which the Bill has been introduced suggests the Minister wishes to move forward quickly with recruiting and training the nuclear specialists who will be absolutely crucial in the case of no deal, and rightly so for the reasons I have just described, but can he confirm how much he anticipates being spent on implementing these measures and exactly when this spending will begin? Also, how do we know it will be a sufficient sum? The explanatory notes talk about a new IT system; I look forward to scrutinising that in the Public Accounts Committee.

Another concern is the extent to which specific are being left to regulations, as has been said, rather than written into the Bill. We are starting to get used to that in this House, but that does not mean it is right: it reduces the level of scrutiny over Government decisions and it erodes public trust.

Given that the Minister has said that he wants associate membership of Euratom, but that formal negotiations might currently not take place, will he publish a policy statement on associate status to enable the industry to start to work around such arrangements as they might progress? Also, will these be Ukraine-style, or Switzerland-style—or, as we have heard from the Minister before, will they be even better? Without oversight of the European Court of Justice and with no freedom of movement, I am not sure we are going to achieve even that. I want to share the Minister’s degree of optimism, but I learned in my physics degree that scepticism is also a valuable approach to life.

**What about transition?** Have the Government given up on that idea, or will transition include continued membership of Euratom? We have heard already how wide-ranging the Euratom treaty is; I suggest that we must decouple the Euratom issue from the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill completely and stop any talk of a cliff-edge on Euratom issues once and for all.

**What if this does go all wrong, however?** Are the Government even considering that? If Government negotiations fail and we crash out of the EU without negotiating a new agreement with Euratom, we will need this legislation, but we will also need so much more. We keep hearing that it is going to be fine. I feel ever more that this House is being drawn into a scene from “Dr Strangelove”: “How Parliament learned to stop worrying and love Brexit.” Our relationship with Euratom is far too important to take a risk like that.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who confirmed that the Liberal Democrats will support the Bill tonight. Indeed, all Members worried about the possibility of the UK falling off a cliff-edge without future arrangements as a result of leaving the EU should support this Bill. It is an important step to avoiding that situation, and this plan B is precisely why the Nuclear Industry Association has described it as “a necessary legislative step.”

It is therefore not a little ironic that the party that wants to have nothing to do with nuclear power, is presumably worried about safeguards, and cannot make a speech without chanting the words “Hard Tory Brexit” appears to be against a contingency plan to prevent precisely that wild accusation from coming true for the nuclear sector. The points made against this Bill by the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), and, indeed, by the Labour party spokesman, the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), cannot therefore be about a lack of preparation for any possibility of disagreement about sensible third-party status with Euratom being secured by negotiation, and it must be clear that anyone voting against the Bill tonight will, indeed, be voting for a very hard Brexit for nuclear energy.

The truth is that we must leave to one side the bizarre positions adopted by the formal two leading Opposition parties, and focus on the Bill itself and the comments of individual Members of Parliament, including the hon. Members for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), and my party colleagues, notably my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who has worked in the nuclear industry.
This is a contingency Bill. We all want a form of associative membership with Euratom that replicates existing arrangements. That is the clear position, is it not, for the entire sector, represented either by the NIA or EDF Energy, the operator of all our existing nuclear power stations, with its operational headquarters in Barnwood in my constituency. It is telling that EDF Energy has said, first, that it appreciates the Government’s “early and constructive engagement on this issue with us”, and, secondly—to deal with some elements of scaremongering—that the UK has extremely “robust” arrangements for safety and security, and, “whatever the status of our membership of Euratom, there is no question but that this will continue to be the case.”

The NIA calls this Bill a welcome first step, but it does raise some questions, and I would be grateful if the Minister, in winding up, responded to some of the following questions. First, will he confirm that a bilateral US-UK nuclear co-operation agreement would be put in place to secure US components for Sizewell B in the event of Euratom’s NCAs and common market not being available to us, presumably through a voluntary offer safeguards agreement with the IAEA? Secondly, will he confirm that our funding in the Joint European Torus—or JET—project, which continues to 2020, will be extended, assuming there is a new relationship with Euratom? Thirdly, will he clarify the contingency process for the movement of nuclear material, goods, people, information and services to be agreed with the Euratom Supply Agency? Finally, will he confirm that our preferred arrangement for the period of transition is as close as possible to the current status quo?

Two other points are worth mentioning. They are about matters that the Bill does not cover. First, the NIA has spelt out clearly that Euratom does not manage the safety of the UK’s nuclear sites, which is, and always has been, determined by the UK, overseen by the Office for Nuclear Regulation; it is important that all our constituents understand that. Secondly, as the Secretary of State spelt out earlier, the radioisotopes are not special fissile nuclear material and their availability will absolutely not be impacted by our leaving Euratom. That is incredibly important for anyone who is worried about the impact of this on our health service.

This is a contingency Bill. The Government recognise our clear goal of securing third-party status with Euratom so that we can have the continuity that is clearly being sought by the entire civil nuclear sector, but they are also putting in place legislative arrangements for the Office for Nuclear Regulation to carry out the nuclear safeguarding work currently done by Euratom if, for whatever reason, that does not happen. The arguments—that is a flattering word to use—put up by Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition were riddled with inconsistencies, as their own Members have shown. However, I would not disagree with anything said by the hon. Member for Leeds West, especially on transition and associate membership. I hope that, recognising the importance of contingency planning as she does, she and indeed all Members of this House will, like me, vote for the Bill tonight.

7.41 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):

Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to be speaking in the debate on the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, but what I have found, Madam Chair, I mean Madam Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: It’s Madam Deputy Speaker.

Patricia Gibson: That is what I said—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. There is no need for hon. Members to contradict the hon. Lady, although I know that they are trying to be helpful. She made a slip of the tongue in referring to me as a Chair rather than as a Deputy Speaker, but I know what she meant.

Patricia Gibson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to be speaking in this debate. Once again, we are in a debate where we are all promised a post-Brexit world that is shinier, better and newer than anything we have witnessed up to this point. Whether we are talking about nuclear safeguards, food safety standards, consumer rights, trade with the EU, the strength of the pound, UK nationals living abroad, EU nationals living in the UK, or 30% being wiped off the bond yields leaving a £1.8 trillion black hole in our public sector pensions bill, we are told that it will be all right on the night and that everything will be wonderful.

The fact is that no state has ever left Euratom before. Despite what we have heard in the Chamber today, some legal experts—I know that we do not always like listening to experts—believe that it would be perfectly possible for the United Kingdom to leave the EU and remain a member of Euratom because, despite sharing the institutions, the two treaties are distinct and have separate legal instruments. I urge the Minister to explore that. The nuclear industry certainly believes that the UK should pursue some form of continuing membership of Euratom. We do not know what form that will take. We have no details or certainty. I think I probably speak for a large chunk of the public across the United Kingdom when I say that the UK Government’s negotiating skills have not inspired confidence.

I remember sitting in a Committee and being told by the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who is now the Leader of the House, that it was necessary and, indeed, essential for us to fly nuclear materials across UK skies so that they could be used in a range of medical treatments at the height of their efficacy. Experts now tell us that leaving Europe’s nuclear regulator will put patients in the UK at risk of losing access to vital medical treatments, but those concerns have been dismissed by Conservative Members. Despite what we have heard tonight, withdrawal from Euratom as part of Brexit would make it harder for the UK to access the nuclear isotopes used in cancer treatments and medical imaging. It is not me who is saying this—I confess that I do not have the medical or scientific expertise to do so—but the Royal College of Radiologists has told us that this is the case, as has Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

I could give the House 20 other examples of people at the top of their game who have told us this, but I fear that I lack the time to do so. Despite all that, those concerns were utterly dismissed by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who is no longer in his place, and the Secretary of State told us that these matters are not within the scope of the Bill. I fear that such a response is not reassuring. I am also alarmed, as I am sure many others will be, that someone who is qualified as an economist sees fit to contradict medical experts.
Euratom is responsible for co-ordinating and regulating the transport, use and disposal of nuclear materials in Europe, including many of the isotopes used in radiotherapy and some kinds of body scans. It seems that some of the most widely used medical isotopes can be produced only in specialised reactors, none of which is located in the United Kingdom. The materials currently used in Britain are mostly manufactured in the Netherlands, Belgium and France. Experts have told us that there is “no excuse” for Government Ministers failing to foresee the problems that leaving Euratom would cause. They have also indicated, given that all these matters are subject to negotiation, that although it might be possible for the UK to remain within the existing arrangements, it would be “exceptionally complicated” and that the UK’s position would “inevitably be weakened”. Those are the words of medical experts at the top of their field. Crucially, no real clarity on how any agreement might be achieved by the UK Government has been forthcoming. The Government’s position paper on Euratom published in July contained little detail even on nuclear power and it did not mention medical isotopes. Perhaps the Minister would care to mention them today. Can he also tell us whether the Secretary of State for Health has been consulted on this matter?

Ministers have absolutely no excuse for failing to anticipate this controversy. The problems were clearly highlighted in an article in the Financial Times way back in February and in briefings by nuclear industry experts. I know that we do not like experts, but occasionally it is useful to listen to them. As with all aspects of Brexit, there is little evidence of any serious planning.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The whole purpose of this Bill is to plan for the contingency where we leave Euratom, so how can the hon. Lady say that?

Patricia Gibson: We have heard repeatedly from those on the Conservative Benches about transitional arrangements and avoiding a cliff edge, but everything is subject to negotiation. As I said earlier, the negotiating and diplomatic skills of the UK Government are deeply suspect, and at worst alarming, when it comes to dealing with Europe.

Dame Sue Ion, the honorary president of the National Skills Academy for Nuclear and a former chair of the Nuclear Innovation Research Advisory Board, has pointed out that “if suitable and robust alternatives to leaving Euratom are not in place, the potential impact”—may mean that we—

“cannot move material or intellectual property or services or components or medical isotopes.”

That view was echoed by Rupert Cowen, a senior nuclear energy lawyer, who has been critical of Government officials, whom he called “ignorant” of the impact of leaving Euratom because they “think it’ll be all right on the night. It won’t.”

If he is tired of hearing that it will be all right on the night with regard to Euratom, imagine what he would make of the list at the start of my speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I crave the indulgence of the Chamber for a few more minutes? I cannot let this debate pass without mentioning something that is not strictly within the scope of the Bill. I fear that we cannot talk about nuclear safety and regulation without pointing to another threat that looms large.

James Cleverly: I chose not to bring this up when the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman was speaking, but the Bill has nothing to do with nuclear safety. It is about nuclear safeguarding. The words are similar, but they have a fundamentally different meaning.

Patricia Gibson: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is making a point about a legalistic separation, but when I speak to constituents about nuclear safeguards and nuclear safety—his experience may be different—the two things are entwined. To separate regulation and safety legally may be one thing, but to separate them when discussing them with constituents is another.

Alan Brown: My hon. Friend has already made her point perfectly, but for absolute clarity about the overlap between nuclear safeguards and nuclear safety, the House of Commons Library briefing on Euratom states that delays in making reciprocal arrangements “would have consequences for current operation, waste and decommissioning, and to new builds such as Hinkley Point.”

If there will be an impact on nuclear decommissioning, does my hon. Friend agree that involves safety risks?

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend makes that point with his usual succinct articulation of the facts.

Before I conclude, it would be remiss of me not to mention something that is outside the scope of the Bill, but very much at home in any debate about nuclear safeguards, nuclear regulation or nuclear safety. Last week, I met the Civil Nuclear Police Federation and was appalled to hear of the Civil Nuclear Constabulary’s concerns. In partnership with the civil nuclear industry, national security agencies and regulatory bodies, the force works to deter any attacker whose intent is the theft or sabotage of nuclear material, whether static or in transit. Should such an attack be made, the CNC will defend that material and access to it. If such material is seized or if high-consequence facilities are compromised, the CNC will recover control of the facility and regain custody of the material. Its officers are therefore heavily armed and have high levels of physical fitness. Their retirement age has been increased to 67 or 68, and I was deeply disappointed that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), has not met those officers, who do such an important job in guarding our safety and often work in harm’s way. I urge him to make the time to meet them.

I also urge the Minister to explore fully all legal avenues and opinions for the UK to remain a member of Euratom, which provides a framework for international nuclear safeguarding compliance and undertakes safeguards, inspections and reporting. Indeed, dispensing with the UK’s international treaty obligations on issues such as non-proliferation that are managed through Euratom will undoubtedly damage the UK’s nuclear industry, jeopardise high-quality jobs in engineering and chemistry and do much to undermine confidence in the UK’s already significantly diminishing international influence.
Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend makes a key point about the breadth of issues that are not covered by the Bill’s narrow focus. Government Members would like to separate safety issues and the unanswered questions that are legion here tonight, but that is the real problem.

Patricia Gibson: I think all Opposition Members sense the unease with which Government Members are unwilling to talk about the Bill’s narrow scope, which leaves so many uncertainties and questions. We are all rightly concerned about nuclear safety, but in our discussions let us remember to give a break to the brave officers of the Civil Nuclear Constabulary, who work day in, day out to maintain nuclear safety across the UK.

7.54 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Realising the risk that I take by making this comparison, may I say that it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)? She and I served on the Procedure Committee together for some time. I listened to her speech with great attention, but I have to say in all good humour that she did a very good caricature of the P. G. Wodehouse quote that it is not very hard to distinguish between a Scotsman or Scotswoman and a ray of sunshine. Her speech was the Don Quixote speech of this debate: there is nothing right about the Bill; we are all going to go to hell in a handcart and—[Interruption.]

Kwasi Kwarteng: We’re all doomed!

Simon Hoare: And we’re all doomed, as I hear my hon. Friend say from a sedentary position.

Let me start by saying what this important Bill is not about. I do not believe that it is a Brexit virility test. I happen to believe that voters on both sides in the referendum will want to see the Bill delivered and landed safely through our proper procedures. I gave my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) prior warning that I would challenge his assertion that one of the core reasons that motivated him to vote to leave the EU was that we would leave Euratom. I simply do not believe my hon. Friend—despite him to vote to leave because, I am going to pray in aid one Mr Dominic Cummings, a man I have not joined on a campaigning platform before. If even Mr Cummings, getting terribly hot under the collar, does not believe that leaving Euratom is some sort of demonstration of Brexit adherence or virility or some test to be passed, that should give us pause for thought.

Because Euratom has not done anything wrong, and because it has not offended against the principles of this House or the country, I fully commend the strategy adopted by Her Majesty’s Government. We need to be pragmatic and sensible in laying the foundations for this important part of our economic life in case, at the end of the process, we find ourselves having to leave. I do not know whether we will end up like Switzerland, which has special status and is seen as an equal partner, or whether we will end up like the United States of America or Australia, which have looser agreements but are not seen as equal partners. Let us see.

Whatever we do and however we do it, I hope it will always be underpinned by the guiding principle that our decisions benefit our constituents and the country at large.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill provides a level of reassurance to the nuclear industry and its 65,000 jobs in this country?

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion of engineering, research and innovation in this place. Anyone who wanted to see Brexit a success would have to understand that we will have political processes but that the regulatory and business communities want clarity and certainty at the earliest possible point. I agree
with her entirely that the Bill provides that bridge, for want of a better analogy, between membership now and a regulatory regime in the future.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way once again. Is it not particularly significant that this is part of a contingency plan, in the light of the objections that we will somehow have a so-called hard Brexit?

Simon Hoare: I agree very much with my hon. Friend. It certainly shoots the fox that we will have a bonfire of regulations and a race to the bottom. I find it strange that those who have spoken against the Bill this evening have, in one breath, accused the Government of presiding over a chaotic, shambolic and uncontrolled, if not incontinent, Brexit process and have then chastised the Government for trying to ensure continuity at an early stage, as my hon. Friend and others have said. Such continuity is welcome, and we would be right to chasitis the Government were we not to have it.

If the Bill is not a debate about Brexit virility, it is also certainly not about access to isotopes, and I absolutely deplore those who have tried to wave that shroud. One of my hon. Friends—I was going to say it was my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), but I do not think it was her—said that access to isotopes is important for a large number of our constituents who need them for medical treatment when they are unwell, and it is the worst kind of shroud waving to say that they will not have that access.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman criticises those who have raised concerns about access to medical isotopes, who were echoing the medical experts in the field. Is he dismissing the legitimate concerns raised by those working in the medical field?

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady falls into a classic trap. I am not one who seeks to dismiss experts—as a non-expert, I always turn to experts for advice—but a concern that is wrong in fact does not become legitimate if it is raised by an expert. A person could be concerned about all sorts of things, and they could have as many letters after their name as they like, but they are not always correct. Some Opposition Members started to fan the embers of this flame about three or four months ago, and it does not appear to have caught.

I have received a briefing note, as I am sure have other colleagues, entitled “What about medical radioisotopes?” The import or export of medical radioisotopes is not subject to any Euratom licensing requirements. Let us seek to assure the experts who have concerns—that their concerns are legitimate, and the House must address them—that Euratom places no restrictions on the export of medical isotopes to countries outside the EU. These isotopes are not subject to Euratom supply agency contracts or to Euratom safeguards, which means no special arrangements need to be put in place ahead of withdrawal.

Withdrawal from Euratom will have no effect on the UK’s ability to import medical isotopes from Europe and the rest of the world. It is in everyone’s interest not to disrupt patients’ timely access to treatment, and it is in everyone’s interest to ensure that cross-border trade with the EU is as frictionless as possible. I entirely take the point raised by several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), that some of these products have a short shelf life, and clearly we cannot have these products sitting in an overheated metal container at the port of Dover or Calais.

Out of common sense I have to ask which country on God’s earth will set a tariff barrier regime and seek to take beyond its useful lifespan a vital component in the delivery of medical care. In the French Government, the German Government and the Belgian Government, we are not dealing with countries that have no interest in public health and healthcare, because of course they do, as do our Government. The idea that those countries will deliberately set up barriers that cause these products to pass their sell-by date, like a piece of chicken that has been sat too long on a supermarket shelf, is fanciful and compounds the allegation that I and several of my hon. Friends have made, that the Bill can be criticised for other reasons, but it is cruel, callous and unnecessary to criticise it at the expense of unsettling people who require medical interventions.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for largely making my point for me. He knows my deep interest in this area, and I draw to his attention the fact that not only has the Secretary of State reiterated those points today but that the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation firmly made them back in June.

Are the expert opinions that my hon. Friend is addressing recent, or are they historical?

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. These debates often get stuck in a groove on the gramophone, the needle gets stuck and we do not knock it forward. I think it was John Maynard Keynes who said, “When the facts change, I change my mind.” A concern is raised, it is addressed, it ceases to be a concern and we move on to something else. I am not saying there will be no other concerns.

Alan Brown rose—

Simon Hoare: On the subject of concerns, I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Alan Brown: Can the hon. Gentleman tell us when the Royal College of Radiologists, Dame Sue Ion or the Nuclear Industry Association changed their mind? The Nuclear Industry Association’s latest briefing came out today, and it still expresses the same concerns. Who are all these people who have suddenly changed their mind?

Simon Hoare: I apologise for seeking to remake this point for the convenience of the hon. Gentleman, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am simply saying this: irrespective of how we might have campaigned and voted in the referendum, this is a time when we have a responsibility, as parliamentarians, to make sure that on certain key things—something as sensitive as this is a key thing—we set aside our personal beefs on whether it is a good or bad idea, in order to make sure our constituents are not alarmed. We have heard from the Secretary of State, read the briefing papers and heard from the Universities Minister, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury...
St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) has pointed out, and that should now shoot that fox well and truly. What has been suggested is not going to be a by-product of coming out of Euratom.

Patricia Gibson: I just want to clarify this point, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will not try to intervene again, because I am sure he will answer it well, and I hope he understands that I have enormous respect for him. I understand that he has a background in public relations, so given his background and level of expertise in his field, is he comfortable with contradicting and dismissing as “scaremongering”, “overreacting” or whatever word he wants to use, the legitimate concerns raised by the Royal College of Radiologists?

Simon Hoare: I am not contradicting. I am seeking to answer—

Alan Brown: You are dismissing them—

Simon Hoare: No, this is not dismissing them either. Are Members honestly saying that when a question is asked and someone answers it, weight can only be given to that answer if it compounds the premise of the question that was raised? [Interruption.] That might be how the Scottish National party goes about doing its politics and its business, but it is not a particularly good way of doing it. People have raised a concern that leaving Euratom may well have an impact on access to this vital ingredient. As this vital ingredient is not covered by Euratom now, it goes beyond eccentricity to suggest that by coming out of this organisation some sort of control is going to be placed on this ingredient, as the organisation we are potentially leaving does not have control of its trade in the first place. I say to Opposition Members that that is a non sequitur. We have been trying to answer calmly and rationally a concern raised by serious and sensible medical practitioners, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds mentioned, we have heard from our Science Minister, who is held in high regard by those in the scientific and medical research community, irrespective of any of their political affiliations. Save for slashing our wrists and writing it in our life’s blood on the wall here in the House of Commons, I am not sure what assurance SNP Members are going to accept.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend think SNP Members will accept that it is ludicrous to imply that medical isotopes would not be able to be imported should we leave Euratom, given that countries currently not in that organisation are importing those medical isotopes at the moment?

Simon Hoare: Once again, my hon. Friend makes the point in the most telling way. If we are providing no illumination to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), we are obviously providing a vast amount of humorous entertainment; I am glad she sees this issue as being so hysterically funny. I do not think setting a regulatory regime to allow all of our constituents to have ready access to a medical treatment is anything particularly to laugh about. People can accuse me of being po-faced and a prig if they so wish, and I could almost hear the Twittersphere doing just that as the words left my mouth, but I do not see this as a particularly funny point. My hon. Friend has made the point tellingly: countries that are not part of Euratom are importing isotopes in due time so that their shelf life does not expire. Unless we have some peculiar, Machiavellian, under-the-counter sort of plan to deny people medical treatment by putting the largest possible tariff barriers on these things and making sure that the inventor carries them across the channel in some sort of purpose-made velvet case that has been hand-sewn by his ancient grandmother, I really do not think this is going to be the situation. Therefore, the concern raised by medics can now be set aside.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that medical isotopes and some associated equipment are also very high value, so it is not in the interests of those who manufacture and seek to export to us to put obstacles in the way of selling high-value, highly profitable pieces of equipment or machinery, be they the isotopes or anything related to them?

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend gets the point, because he takes a Conservative approach to the operation of the economy. People in Britain want to buy something. We do not make it, but some countries overseas do. But we have also heard this, “We make too much for our domestic market and we want to sell it overseas. We have been doing this for years, but, do you know what? Just to bite off our nose to spite our face, we’ll stop doing it.” That is the crux of the argument we have heard from the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). I would say it was bizarre if it were not so careless.

Let me conclude my remarks by returning to the point about the value—soft as well as hard—to UK plc of the collaborative opportunities for research that membership of an organisation such as Euratom presents. We have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) about the supply chain, the jobs and the offshoots of economic activity that flow from this. If we are talking about background research, I understand that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran has a nuclear facility in her constituency. One can only presume that she has constituents who work in it, but she said precious little about them in her speech—

Patricia Gibson: That was not in the scope of the Bill.

Simon Hoare: Well, that did not stop the hon. Lady dilating on lots of other things that were not in the Bill. This sudden stricture of rectitude and probity that she cloaks herself in as the winter months approach is a little hard to take. We should never underestimate what that collaborative research does to advance the sum of human knowledge, and to benefit our country in hard currency terms and profile terms as a centre of excellence, expertise, professionalism and world leadership. I see this Bill as very much taking a belt-and-branches approach. I just hope that if we have to default to this, because we find that the lawyers are right or we are not allowed to remain part of Euratom as there is some conflict with the European Court of Justice or whatever, the regimes we put in place and the culture we create tell the rest of the world interested in this sector that we, too, are open for business and committed to research, and we are not turning our back on academic and, yes, medical collaboration.
8.19 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What a pleasure it is to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). I support the Bill. The introduction of a Bill on nuclear safeguards is an entirely sensible contingency measure. It is sensible to cater for the possibility that no associate membership of Euratom can be agreed; indeed, given the importance of the matters covered by our current membership, it would be extraordinary were the Government not to do so. I have listened with interest to the Opposition speeches but, ultimately, they resulted in sound and fury signifying nothing, because it appears that no one is going to vote against the Bill’s Second Reading.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify whether the Bill is a contingency and a back-up or the bright, shining new way forward? Mixed messages are coming from Government Members.

Alex Chalk: It is a sensible contingency to deal with safeguarding. We will no doubt be able to consider other aspects in due course.

Were the Government not to introduce the Bill, they would be in complete dereliction of their duty. The background is as follows: the UK has a strong and developed nuclear sector, with 15 nuclear reactors generating 21% of our electricity; there is something in the order of 30 licensed nuclear sites; and our nuclear industry serves important civilian purposes, including medicine, transport, farming and industrial processes.

It is worth my taking a moment to reflect on the Bill’s key purpose, which is to give the Office for Nuclear Regulation—a UK body—powers to take on the roles and responsibilities required for us to meet our international safeguarding and nuclear non-proliferation obligations. What does that mean? In other words, it is to demonstrate and ensure that civil nuclear material is used only for civil purposes, not military ones.

It is also worth reflecting on what the Bill is not about. First, notwithstanding the points made by the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), it is not about security standards in the UK. The security standards relate to the physical protection measures. The UK already follows the convention on the physical protection of nuclear material, which is outwith the scope of the Bill. Indeed, the related responsibilities are already within the ambit of the ONR.

Secondly, the Bill is not about safety standards for the prevention of nuclear accidents. We will continue to observe the standards imposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency, overseen by the ONR. We have heard a bit about medical isotopes, which are not special fissile material, so I do not propose to traverse the ground that has already been ably ventilated by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset.

It is clear, though, that our membership of Euratom covers far more than safeguarding. I wish to develop a little the points that were helpfully set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). First, on research and development such as that on fusion technologies, we need to continue our collaborations. We heard a little about the JET scheme, which ends in 2018, although the Government have rightly committed funding for it in case it is extended to 2020. We want that co-operation to continue.

Secondly, there is the international thermonuclear experimental reactor project to build the world’s largest tokamak—at that point, my expertise starts to evaporate, but it is important.

Thirdly, the Government have already committed to funding the Horizon 2020 projects that were entered into before March 2019—the date of our departure—even if they continue after our departure. That is absolutely the right thing to do. All that underscores the importance of such projects to our economy and the European economy more widely.

After research and development, the second area that the Bill does not cover but in the perpetuation of which we have a strong national interest is nuclear co-operation arrangements, and we have heard a little about Australia, Japan, the United States and Canada. Those agreements matter because the United States cannot enter into trade agreements with the UK unless NCAs are in place. That is vital.

The third point that bears re-emphasis is the free movement of highly expert scientists. All three things must be secured, and the easiest and most sensible way to do so would be through associate membership of Euratom. It is worth making the point that there is no off-the-shelf solution: the Swiss associate membership relates only to scientific and technological co-operation and the Ukrainian model is even more limited.

The Bill is entirely necessary and entirely sensible, but in a way it is just the easy bit. Just as vital is that we secure co-operation in all the other areas, too. I have already said a little about associate membership, which I suspect is the most straightforward way to deliver that co-operation, but there might be others. I have every confidence that once this sensible contingency legislation on safeguarding is securely enacted, moving on to other matters is precisely what the Government will go on to do.

8.25 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), and before him my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who I understand is now about to leave the Chamber. It is always a pleasure to follow the latter, but although he has many qualities, brevity is perhaps not one of them.

The Bill is important, and I very much hope that its Second Reading will be unopposed. It is a crucial part of the Brexit process and I believe it will be able to operate with or without an EU deal. That flexibility is provided in the middle section of the Bill. Despite what was said by some of the Labour Back Benchers who were present earlier, it is absolutely clear that a country cannot remain a member of Euratom if it is outside the EU. It is not just the UK Government who make that point; the EU Commission makes that point. If someone says to the Government, “Let’s see your legal advice, because we don’t believe you. We have no faith in that opinion”, they should also say that to the EU Commission and ask it why it is putting out that opinion and saying that it is absolutely correct that a country cannot be in Euratom if it is outside the EU. Nevertheless, our current safeguards relate to our being members of Euratom, so it is right that we have a Bill that will enable those safeguards to be replaced when we leave the EU.
Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It seems to me that the Bill is not only a contingency plan but a crucial building block for our negotiation. Our negotiation requires legislation such as this Bill, so that we can get everything else sorted and get a decent agreement with Euratom.

Gareth Johnson: The Government have been absolutely clear that they must prepare for all eventualities, and that is precisely what is currently happening.

I congratulate the Minister on putting resources into the country's nuclear industry. It is essential to ensure that British nuclear fusion research continues when we leave Euratom. We have invested a huge amount of time, resources and effort in becoming a world leader in this field, and we must not allow our status to diminish. The Culham Centre has been mentioned a few times. It is not the only centre that specialises in such work, but it is crucial and it employs many people. It is essential that the Government do all they can to protect its valuable work and keep its workers in place.

I am pleased that the Minister has found some funding for the JET project, which has massive potential in the nuclear fusion industry. It is hard to overstate just what advances can be achieved if we ensure that the investment in that project continues not just in the UK, but across the world.

All too often we are a little too apologetic about our work in this industry when, in fact, successive Governments can be incredibly proud of our work on nuclear safeguards. We have a proven track record as a nuclear weapon state; we have signed the non-proliferation treaty; we have worked at the heart of the IAEA since its inception and we will continue to work with it and uphold our international obligations. That is something about which we can hold our head high. We can be very proud of the fact that, right from the beginning, we have been one of the few countries that has said that non-nuclear countries should remain so without any assistance from nuclear countries. That is vital.

We have also worked very well with the EU over safeguarding, and can continue to do so in the future, but we will need this Bill to enable that to happen. The Bill will allow a safe and pioneering future for our nuclear industry, and that collaboration with the EU can continue. The expertise that we have acquired from both sides of the Chamber today can be shared between nations and with the EU and around the world. It is clear that the European Union and the UK have a strong mutual interest in ensuring that this close co-operation continues in the future. That was set out very clearly in the position paper of the Department for Exiting the European Union—the Government's nuclear materials and safeguards paper—that was published in July. We have been very open in our positioning papers about our stance in negotiations, and in July we gave a clear indication of where we wanted to go with this particular issue.

There is no reason why we cannot have a safe, pioneering, co-operative and responsible nuclear industry after Brexit. Yes, decisions will have to be made and agreements reached on issues such as the ownership of property at Culham. My understanding is that Euratom owns some of the property at our centres and that there will have to be some negotiations over who should continue to own that property once Brexit takes place, but, like so many other things involving Brexit, that can be resolved through negotiation.

In conclusion, this Bill will provide continuity, reassurance, protections and safeguards for the whole of this country and the whole of the industry and therefore should be given its Second Reading today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many Members wish to take part in this important debate and that, although all speakers from the Opposition Benches have completed their speeches, a great many Members on the Government Benches wish to speak. I am afraid that I will have to impose a time limit from now on of six minutes. I am sorry that that may come as a surprise to Mr Mark Menzies, but I am sure that he will be able to deal with the matter.

8.32 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am devastated by the news that I have been cut down to a mere six minutes, but I will do what I can.

This nuclear safeguard Bill is of real importance not just to me and to my constituency, but to the 1,200 people who work at Springfields nuclear fuels in my constituency. Springfields is at the heart of the British nuclear industry. We are the only site in the UK to manufacture nuclear fuel. As we have already heard this evening, 21% of the UK’s electricity production is produced from nuclear energy, and a great swathe of that is from nuclear fuel manufactured in Fylde.

Whenever I hear the phrase “northern powerhouse”, I think not just of the nuclear industry in the north-west, but of the nuclear fuel that is manufactured in my Fylde constituency. I have met both the workforce and the management in recent months. Initially, there were some real concerns over the UK’s possible exit from Euratom and what that would mean for the continuity of supply. However, in conversations with the Minister, I have been deeply reassured by the fact that this is a Government who are working towards the possibility of remaining a member of Euratom and, if we cannot do that, of ensuring that we are safeguarding Britain’s civil nuclear interests by having these measures firmly in place in this Bill.

This is not just about dealing with trade between the UK and Europe, important though that is. Springfields Fuels is owned by Westinghouse, a company with quite complex ownership—both Japanese and American footprints. Therefore, any deal or legislation must be compliant with what our Japanese and American partners have in place. I am reassured by the Minister’s words in our meeting last week and in the debate this evening that this Bill will, indeed, cover that.

The nuclear industry must be able to trade from the first post-Brexit moment. Without implementation of the safeguards in the Bill, the UK would be unable to put the nuclear co-operation agreements in place in the future. Those are currently provided under the Euratom regime and they are vital because this is about not just dealing with Europe, but all our international partnerships. We are not just talking about nuclear fuel in its completed form, but oxides, pellets and the various added-value products that a company such as Springfields Fuels puts into the nuclear supply chain. If we do not get this right, the jobs of British people could ultimately be at risk and moved elsewhere. It is not about keeping
Members participating in and listening to this debate, which is perhaps why there are so few Opposition are prepared for every eventuality? It is common sense, it is only prudent and simply good governance that we while membership of Euratom has served the UK well, is an important opportunity to reiterate that the a smooth passage.

Friend that this is common sense. The Opposition argue thoughtful by ensuring that things are in place to ensure —— could be done in the UK. That would become a highly exportable technology. Rather than importing much of the new nuclear technology from overseas, the United Kingdom can own it and, surely, emerging new nuclear technology must be at the forefront of shaping our post-Brexit destiny. I hope that the Minister can assure me that the Government will think about and protect SMRs in the detail of the legislation. That is also important for Moorside. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who is not currently in her place, is a passionate campaigner for Moorside, and such technology would bring jobs to Cumbria. The fuel from Moorside would also be manufactured at Springfields Fuels nuclear plant. Therefore, the measures in the Bill really are important to ensuring jobs and the futures of all our economies, particularly those in the north-west.

8.38 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies). I join in this debate not as a Member who has a particularly close partnership with the nuclear industry, nor as someone with specific knowledge of Euratom. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) says that he voted to leave because of Euratom, but, a little like my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), I cannot possibly say that I voted to remain because of it. However, the nuclear industry and our nuclear future in all its guises is extremely important to us all. To that end, the Bill is a necessary measure in response to the decisions taken after the referendum—a plan B, as some have referred to it. I urge everyone to join me in giving the Bill an unopposed passage through the House this evening.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend agree that, while membership of Euratom has served the UK well, it is only prudent and simply good governance that we are prepared for every eventuality? It is common sense, which is perhaps why there are so few Opposition Members participating in and listening to this debate.

Jo Churchill: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend that this is common sense. The Opposition argue that we are being presumptive, but we are just being thoughtful by ensuring that things are in place to ensure a smooth passage.

As has been said, this is about soft collaboration. It is an important opportunity to reiterate that the Government’s aim is to ensure that collaborative research and development continues, with close working relationships between universities, both in Europe and across the world, and other organisations.

It is clear that nuclear is a global industry, given the foreign investment in the UK nuclear industry from France and China. The issue is particularly pertinent in Suffolk, with EDF and Sizewell C due to come on stream. It is for that reason that our future relationship with the European Union is so important to understanding the future of the sector in the UK, as well as what it will mean for jobs, skills and businesses.

I am reassured by the Bill’s commitment to maintaining our current safeguards and standards under Euratom. By leaving those unchanged, the UK can guarantee a close working relationship with the Euratom community and those further afield. That is a wise decision to ensure close working with our natural partners, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and others have said.

Closer to home, Sizewell C on the Suffolk coast is under consideration, having completed stage 2 of the consultation process. Its potential is huge: it could power 6 million homes with clean, affordable nuclear energy and create 26,000 jobs and apprenticeships in the region. It would be at the cutting edge of the UK nuclear industry and receive significant international investment. That point was ably made by my hon. Friends the Members for Fylde and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who stated that the nuclear industry gives nearly £1 billion to the UK economy. It is important that we acknowledge its monetary significance.

West Suffolk College in my constituency is a national centre for nuclear and it is preparing for Sizewell C. East Anglia is fast proving its worth as a crucial region for skills, research and innovation, with Cambridge sitting at its heart.

I appreciate that the Bill does not cover EU research funding, but given that we are discussing the UK’s nuclear industry, it would not be amiss to remind the House that the UK is a world leader in the most promising nuclear fusion technologies, which is not something on which we intend to compromise on Brexit. As my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde has said, we could be a world leader and it is important that we have the appropriate safeguards in place. That is why a smooth transition, which is contingent on continuity for the sector, is so vital.

The UK wants to explore ways in which continued collaboration, including in nuclear research and training, can be taken forward. For a vibrant region such as East Anglia, that is crucial not just for the possibility of major nuclear investment on our coast, but so that any investment opportunities are not lost on Brexit. Part of that understanding is that all our obligations on safeguards are met. We need to ensure that all systems are transparent and accountable with regard to material and how it is kept.

I will close my speech with two wider points thrown up by the Bill, and I hope the Minister will respond to them when he sums up the debate. On nuclear safeguarding in our communities, what assessment has he made of the role that my outstanding West Suffolk College and other colleges could play as centres of learning for any nuclear engineering apprentices working on my coastline

[Mark Menzies]
and others, including Hinkley and the north-west? How will safeguards be built into that training? How will we future-proof those people whom we will employ in the industry? How does the ONR cascade information through this system? Hinkley Point is a crucial model to learn from for future nuclear projects in the UK, especially in relation to its funding models.

As we leave the European Union, the need to draw skills and jobs to keep our nuclear sector vibrant becomes arguably more urgent, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) said. That includes those whose skills lie in repositories. We must ensure that we are scraping the skills needed as we withdraw from Euratom so that we have, as this Bill states, a seamless continuation of the high standards of this industry, and the UK maximises and, as the Secretary of State said, even raises the standards within the IAEA.

8.45 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I am genuinely pleased that this issue has been given such importance. That is not because, as some might have suggested, it is a sort of remoaner ambush, but because it reflects the importance of our nuclear industry, which in turn reflects the importance that the Government have attached to nuclear technologies in the UK as part of our industrial strategy. The valued engagement of the industry is most welcome. It is great to hear its very legitimate concerns over Euratom. The industry would obviously want no change whatsoever: of course not; nobody can blame it for seeking certainly and therefore advocating the status quo.

Let us be clear: there is absolutely nothing wrong with Euratom. It has proven very effective at regulating the nuclear industry. If the treaty did not require us to leave after triggering article 50, I am pretty sure that we would not do so, but as it does require it, a new arrangement must be sought. I genuinely have no doubt that this new arrangement will be characterised by keen agreement and co-operation between the UK and our EU partners. The nuclear industry is, after all, international and interdependent. We have significant French ownership of our nuclear stations and further international ownership is promised with the remainder of the new nuclear fleet. Similarly, Germany has a great deal of nuclear waste being processed in Sellafield. With the UK, France and Germany so interdependent on one another on matters nuclear, one might expect the wind to be on our backs, not in our faces, when seeking a deal on our future relationship on nuclear matters.

An associate membership is probable—highly probable, even. For the more ardent Brexiteers among us, that should not bother us either. Euratom has been a remarkably consensual organisation—I do not believe there have been any votes—and therefore the jurisdiction of the EU Court should not be a concern for us in this case. However, regardless of that probable outcome, we need something else in case good sense deserts our EU partners and nuclear safeguards becomes part of the wider wrangling over Brexit. That is why the Government are to be congratulated on introducing the Bill so soon. This regulation will give the nuclear industry the certainty that it so reasonably demands. Nuclear safeguarding is not something on which we take risks. Pursuing a favourable post-Brexit relationship with Euratom is important and should obviously be our preference, but legislating for increased powers in the Office for Nuclear Regulation so that Euratom’s capabilities are duplicated as being sovereign within the United Kingdom seems very prudent at this early stage.

After this debate, it is important to pause and reflect on what neither the Bill nor Euratom does. Euratom does not do nuclear safety—that is already regulated in the United Kingdom by the ONR. My constituents who live as neighbours to Hinkley Point know that the safety regulations that govern the operation of that site are entirely unaffected by the Euratom issue. Nor does the Bill affect isotopes used in medicine. The scaremongering on this has been unfortunate, and I hope that it will not continue as the Bill progresses.

Drew Hendry: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman’s comments. Does he, then, disagree with the Nuclear Industry Association? It has said:

“Leaving the Euratom Treaty without alternative arrangements in place would have a dramatic impact on the nuclear industry including the UK’s new build plans, existing operations and the waste and decommissioning sector which all depend, to some extent, on cooperation with nuclear states.”

James Heappey: I am absolutely at a lost to understand the SNP’s position on this. We have an excellent relationship with Euratom, which we want, ideally, to continue as an associate member. But, as the hon. Gentleman quite rightly points out, the nuclear industry is very concerned that, if that arrangement turns out not to be possible, we should have some sort of contingency in place to ensure that the industry can continue to operate safely and co-operate internationally. That is exactly what the Bill will do, so I do not understand why he is not welcoming it with open arms.

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to clarify. The key is in the final part of the quote, which talks about the impact on existing operations and the waste and decommissioning sectors. That cannot be carried forward by the Bill in isolation; there are many unanswered questions.

James Heappey: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman adds anything to his earlier intervention. There is a system in place through Euratom for the regulation and safeguarding of the movement of fissile materials and other issues connected to nuclear regulation. We would ideally stay within Euratom as an associate member, but if that is not possible, we seek to legislate for a contingency, so that we have those powers sovereign. One would assume that the Government—I think that this has been made very clear in the Secretary of State’s opening remarks and all the Government’s commentary on the matter thus far—expect to continue everything exactly as it is, so that we can continue to operate seamlessly internationally. The Bill will provide a contingency plan to avoid the hard exit or cliff edge that so many in this place and in the media seem so vexed about. I just do not understand why the SNP does not welcome the Bill, when it appears to give the party exactly what it wants by delivering certainty post Brexit.

There are two issues that the Bill does not cover, quite understandably, but that are worth discussing. First, nuclear technology, materials and engineers need to be able to move freely, so we must achieve a quick and lasting agreement with other countries. Our nuclear programme is international, and we must recognise that
in the arrangements that we make. I have every confidence that we will, and that the countries with which we seek to work will warmly welcome our approaches.

Secondly, there is the matter of funding for research and development. As we decarbonise our heating and transport systems, our demand for electricity will rise sharply. Renewables and our new nuclear programme are the answer for now, but the prize that we have all been looking for, for half a century, is fusion power. That has been eight to 15 years away for a very long time, and quite possibly it is still eight to 15 years away. When the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change went to the United States last year, however, it was clear that progress is starting to be made quickly on that side of the Atlantic. When we returned home, we were pleased to find after further inquiries that progress on this side of the Atlantic has been even quicker still. The UK, with our European partners, is ahead on the matter. It is absolutely vital that the Government commit, as they have done, to continuing to fund the research and development of fusion power. The opportunities are huge, and it is a prize on which the Government should keep their eyes.

In conclusion, I absolutely understand the concerns that nuclear industry representatives have raised with me, and I understand why they want certainty. They work in an industry in which there is absolutely no appetite or tolerance for risk, so it is entirely understandable that they seek the certainty of continued membership of Euratom. They should be reassured that the Government’s first preference is associate membership of Euratom, as a result of which nothing would change. If that is not possible, how prudent it is for the Government to seek, at the very first opportunity, to legislate to provide a contingency to assure the UK nuclear industry that safeguarding regulations are firmly in hand. Those regulations will be familiar to the industry, because they will look remarkably similar to the ones that we have now.

8.54 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I rise to support the Bill, unsurprisingly, because as colleagues well know, the decision to leave the European Union also meant, by extension, a decision to leave Euratom. This issue has been debated on the Floor of the House, but that is the position of both the UK Government and the EU27. The Government have therefore made it clear that they intend to honour their commitment to the International Atomic Energy Agency by setting up a domestic safeguarding regime. The regime will ensure that there is no interruption to the British civil nuclear industry and, indeed, that the production of nuclear energy and the various other workings enabled by Euratom will continue without pause.

It would be unacceptable for the UK not to have a safeguarding regime in place on its exit from the European Union. Although it is absolutely appropriate for colleagues and Opposition Members to scrutinise and perhaps amend the Bill during its passage, it would be foolhardy and, in the extreme—in fact, deeply inappropriate—to try in any way to prevent it from ultimately making its way through the House. That is why I am very pleased that the Labour party made it clear, after what I must say was an elegant period of anticipation-building delay by the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey)—she teased us about the position of Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition until the ultimate line of her speech—that it will let the Bill progress, so that any such concerns are alleviated.

I have listened with interest to a number of speeches—no, to them all—and I was particularly exercised by some of the points made in interventions by SNP Members. As I said in an intervention and will now repeat—this has been highlighted by the Nuclear Industry Association, on its Twitter feed during the debate—there is not just a semantic difference but a fundamental difference between nuclear safeguarding and nuclear safety. I will give SNP Members the benefit of the doubt and say that the subtlety of that difference was perhaps lost on them, because the alternative assumption I would have to make is that they intentionally blurred the distinction between the two to scare the British people on what this is about, and I am certain that they would not do so intentionally.

SNP Members also placed great store on the supposed risks to medical radioisotopes. Again, I took the time, while keeping one ear on the speeches, to look at the briefing paper from the Nuclear Industry Association that they mentioned. It makes reference to concerns about radioisotopes, but when I followed the links I found a circuit of links using basically the same phrase on the concern about five radioisotopes. I finally got to what I think was the end of the chain, and I discovered that, in response to the squeezing of the supply of medical radioisotopes, Euratom and other agencies had set up the European Observatory on the Supply of Medical Radioisotopes. That body has worked in the intervening years to ensure that there is a timely supply of medical radioisotopes. That goes to the heart of showing that the concerns raised—again, inadvertently, I suspect—by SNP Members and others about the diagnostic ability of the NHS somehow being compromised by a lack of radioisotopes is in fact a fallacy.

Drew Hendry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cleverly: No, I will not give way, because a number of Members still wish to speak. I apologise; I would normally give way, but I am about to conclude because I know we are short of time.

The Bill will give the Office for Nuclear Regulation additional powers. It will give the Government the opportunity to use limited powers to amend the Nuclear Safeguards and Electricity (Finance) Act 1978, the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2000 and the Nuclear Safeguards and Electricity (Finance) Act 2017. The Government have therefore made it clear that they intend to honour their commitment to the International Atomic Energy Agency by setting up a domestic safeguarding regime. The regime will ensure that there is no interruption to the British civil nuclear industry and, indeed, that the production of nuclear energy and the various other workings enabled by Euratom will continue without pause.

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The Bill will give the Office for Nuclear Regulation additional powers. It will give the Government the opportunity to use limited powers to amend the Nuclear Safeguards and Electricity (Finance) Act 1978, the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2000 and the Nuclear Safeguards (Notification) Regulations 2004, so that references in legislation to existing international agreements can be updated. I appreciate that Opposition Front Benchers have concerns about that, but it strikes me as a remarkably pragmatic attempt to get important business through the House in a timely manner, so that our important nuclear industries are not compromised. I commend the measure to the House.

9 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): My only regret in speaking is that, given the constraints on our time, you have imposed a six-minute limit on our speeches, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I feel that I could speak for a long time on the important subject of our debate.
The Bill is precisely the sort of responsible measure that a good, decent, forward-looking Government would introduce to avoid the cliff edge that we are told is a problem with so-called hard Brexit. The debate is serious, but the Opposition are clearly not taking it seriously. I am disappointed that so few of our Opposition colleagues participated. I am surprised that we have had a string of Conservative speakers, without even a bat squeak from the Opposition in response.

From the speeches of members of the Opposition parties, one would think that we faced disaster if we left Euratom. We will not face disaster precisely because of the Bill. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) quoted a nuclear expert and used the phrase, to which he did not return, “without alternative arrangements”. That is key. The expert said that, if we left Euratom “without alternative arrangements”, there would be a problem, but the whole point of the Bill is to set up those alternative arrangements, without which we would face a more difficult situation. The hon. Gentleman could not have made a more ridiculous point.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to respond. Does he accept that the industry would prefer to stay in Euratom or have an alternative membership to “alternative arrangements”?  

Kwasi Kwarteng: I know that the hon. Gentleman has been listening to the debate with rapt attention, and he will have noticed in the course of several hours of discussion that we are leaving Euratom because, if he remembers, we voted to leave the EU last year. It was not the British Government who said we had to leave Euratom, but the Commission. The EU itself said that, as a consequence of voting to leave the EU, we had to leave Euratom, and we have taken it at its word. Perhaps we should not have done; perhaps the hon. Gentleman has intelligence that we do not possess, but we took it at its word and, consequently, it is quite proper to seek, through the Bill, to provide the “alternative arrangements” that industry experts have suggested are necessary to smooth the transition process.

I also wish to point out how depressingly gloomy a lot of the SNP’s language has been. We have been told that we are useless negotiators and that the state of Britain’s diplomacy is woefully inadequate. We have been told all sorts of things about how bad things are going, and of course nothing could be further from the truth. It is a complete fantasy. In fact, our diplomacy is highly respected throughout the world. We have a highly effective, well trained force and a disciplined, professional cadre of people. It is nauseating to hear SNP Members decry and denigrate our civil service in that way, and it is indicative of their lack of seriousness that only two Members from that particular party are graceing us with their presence in the Chamber.

With a couple of minutes to spare, I want to talk briefly about Britain’s traditions in nuclear power. I know it was uncomfortable to hear, but my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) was right that we are leaving Euratom at a moment when the countries of Europe, such as Germany, Italy and even Austria, are retreating from civil nuclear power. It is not something they want in their energy mix. The response of the German Chancellor to the Fukushima disaster in 2011 was to suggest that Germany would not pursue nuclear power and would shut down its nuclear power plants. Indeed, it is revealing that Frau Merkel is now in conversation with the Green party in Germany. Her coalition is dependent on Green party co-operation, and those of us who follow these things will know that the Green party is singularly opposed to nuclear power. It is the one thing that will not happen if it enters the Government in Germany, once the Government have been constituted, so there is no way that the Germans will develop this line of research. Similarly, we understand that Austria has banned the transfer of nuclear material.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman rightly points out where he disagrees with politicians of other places or has criticisms of them, but will he withdraw his earlier remark about the SNP criticising civil servants, which we have never done? All we have done is criticise the failure of this Government.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Forgive me, but one of the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues mentioned—we can all look at Hansard tomorrow—that our diplomacy was being ridiculed and was somehow deficient. If someone says that diplomacy is deficient, they are criticising the diplomats who are conducting that diplomacy, and I am afraid that most of those diplomats are indeed civil servants, so that was criticism of our civil servants, with no cause whatever—it was just a form of abuse. I know that SNP Members get caught up in their rhetorical exercises and like to make a big splash in the House of Commons, but I thought that was completely unnecessary.

Lastly, when it comes to freedom of access and foreign scientists and nuclear power experts coming to Britain, there is no country that is more open, from the academic point of view, to foreign talent and ingenuity than Great Britain. We have dozens of Nobel prize winners, many of whom came from outside the United Kingdom. We also have a great record in practical science and in businesses that have developed from the fruits of that practical science, so again this scaremongering and project fear is completely misplaced. I suggest to those hon. Members that they just move on.

9.9 pm  

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the many thoughtful and informed speeches we have heard this evening, and it is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), who speaks with great passion on these matters—and always manages to do so without many notes, which I for one find very impressive. I am regularly asked by constituents what progress is being made on Brexit, and tonight’s Bill represents perhaps our first substantive policy debate at Second Reading on an issue that matters to our constituents on a day-to-day basis as we chart our exit from the EU. It is disappointing, therefore, after all the bluster at the start of the debate, when Labour Members had a lot to say for themselves, that we have such barren Benches opposite now. I would be happy to take an intervention from one of them on this important issue, but unfortunately they are not here.

This issue affects all our constituents. The civil nuclear industry is very important and affects every person in the country. It is manifest to keeping the lights on and to the jobs of thousands of people directly employed in the nuclear sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) was right to highlight how this
was not just an abstract issue but one that affected people’s lives and livelihoods. It is also relevant, however, in the context of supply chains—tons of steel is used in nuclear projects, for example. We should not forget, therefore, that this affects not only jobs directly involved in the industry but many jobs throughout the supply chain.

I listened carefully to what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said during his remarks. I thought he put his case eloquently and set out his rationale brilliantly. I noted down a few of the key points he raised. The first was that we had to go down this route because of the article 50 requirements. That is very simple. Opposition Members are often keen to cosy up to the European Commission, and often think the Commission is absolutely right, so I have to ask myself why they do not believe it on this occasion. The position has been made very clear, by both the UK Government and the Commission, so perhaps Opposition Members need to go away and have a look at that.

I was also pleased to hear that we must and will live up to our obligations, as we would all expect. Of course, businesses and the sector want as much certainty and continuity as possible, and that is exactly what the Bill seeks to achieve. It is also possible to deliver the benefits of Euratom membership through other means. We want to continue to adhere to the standards set down and therefore we fully support their replication. My constituents would expect us to replicate them. We hear about lots of different policy areas in the House—international trade, for example. What point would there be in our watering down the standards we adhere to at present? I have heard no logical argument for why we as a country would want to do that. It just is not in our interests as we look to go out into the world and make a success of Brexit. It is also in our national interest to have sensible strategic co-operation into the future. It is the responsible, right and logical thing to do. That good will was demonstrated by the commitment to underwrite the UK’s share of the EU joint European torus project.

The Bill will ensure that the UK continues to meet its international obligations on nuclear safeguards as they apply to civil nuclear material through the International Atomic Energy Agency; to maintain the UK’s reputation as a responsible nuclear state that supports international nuclear non-proliferation; and to protect UK electricity supplied by nuclear power. Who could argue with any of that? The Bill is one of contingency, certainty and reassurance, so I am surprised that the Opposition are not as enthusiastic, not least because we so frequently hear from them about how we are not making sufficient progress. When we try to make progress, they criticise us for it. It makes no sense. They cannot have it both ways. They cannot continue using such issues—important technical issues—as a proxy for something else.

It was very disappointing to hear the reckless scaremongering about isotopes for medical uses. People will have heard those claims and been concerned. We should not do that. The House has a responsibility to be honest. We need to be truthful about the issue, and I am very pleased that the Secretary of State was able to provide the reassurance that people sought.

Let us not forget that there is still a very long way to go in the negotiations that lie ahead of us. I believe that we have a great deal to offer as a country in relation to nuclear. We lead on research, we lead on innovation and we lead on science, so we bring a lot to the table. As I have said, there is a long way to go in the negotiations; let us see what can be agreed.

9.15 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is, perhaps, less pleasurable than it should be to follow so many of my colleagues, because it means that no one on the Opposition Benches is bothering to speak, which is very disappointing. [HON. MEMBERS: “There are some Scottish National party Members here.”] You guys are very committed: well done.

It is absolutely understandable that there is concern about the approach that the United Kingdom will take to nuclear safeguarding when we leave the European Union and Euratom in 2019. That is why the Bill is so important. It is about ensuring that we maintain our current high standard of safeguarding, and ensuring that the Government are able to develop any future obligations that are placed on the UK by the international community.

The hysteria with which the Bill has been met by Opposition Members is bemusing. They seem adamant and convinced that the Government plan to rip up all their international obligations post-Brexit, although what is on paper in the Bill is the exact opposite: it represents a commitment to continuity, and is vital to our wider negotiating position in Europe. As for the concerns raised about the industry itself, there is absolutely no reason why new and possibly more favourable trade agreements cannot be struck with the countries that supply the UK once we leave the EU. In talks with the Government, many of those nations have been effusive about establishing post-Brexit trade deals. This summer the Prime Minister secured a pledge from Japan, which currently supplies Oldbury nuclear power station, to commit itself to a trade deal when Britain leaves the EU.

Given those positive soundings, I think that the move away from the EU has the potential to spawn more fruitful international relationships for the UK nuclear industry. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) made it clear that the EU’s interest in nuclear power is waning. Countries are rowing back on their nuclear commitments, setting time limits on when they want to get out of nuclear power, so perhaps we are better off out of it.

It cannot be denied that the EU’s support for research and development in this field has been instrumental in driving innovation. As Opposition Members have been keen to point out, we have received money and support from the EU, but they often forget that it does not come free of charge, and that we pay for our membership of that club.

Chris Green: Does my hon. Friend agree that as we look towards moving from Horizon 2020 to framework programme 9, there is a strong possibility that the European Union will emphasise a move away from cutting-edge research to capacity building? Will that not cause us a problem?

Ben Bradley: I entirely agree. It is vital for us to be able to safeguard our national interests and the skills that we have in great numbers, so that we can support the industry and continue to go from strength to strength in the UK, regardless of what the Germans tell us we should be doing.
The Joint European Torus programme in Oxfordshire is a key example of the positive support that we have received. The Government have pledged to underwrite the UK’s share of the cost of the project until 2020 to meet our international obligations and ensure the success of the project. The same applies to Horizon 2020. That willingness to participate in such projects is a clear indication that the UK will not turn its back on commitments with the EU at the expense of scientific progress. The desire to support the sciences domestically will also filter down into immigration policy. The Government have already made it clear that they are keen for the brightest and best people from the world of science to continue to come and work in the UK, and that is not going to change.

The simple fact is that the UK is leaving the EU and, necessarily, Euratom. The European Commission has made that pretty clear. There can be no watered-down half-membership, as Euratom comes with commitments to the European courts and free movement that my constituents would never go for. While the Bill does raise questions about the future of the nuclear industry—all things are uncertain when it comes to a huge negotiation on the scale of Brexit—it is clear that its intention is to promote continuity and ensure that Britain’s high standards of nuclear safeguarding are maintained after we leave. It is a vital contingency plan to ensure that if we do end up with no deal—which no one wants, blah blah blah—[Laughter]—we are ready for that eventuality. That was not meant as a “filler”, but there is no point in going over the same old argument again.

As many of my colleagues have said over many months, we are leaving the EU. That is right and necessary, and it has to be a clean break, but we are not leaving Europe, and we want to continue to co-operate on many aspects that are beneficial to the UK.

It appears that the Opposition are not even going to vote against the Bill. They are playing a dangerous political game with an important decision—talking about the nuclear Armageddon that will inevitably come from the passing of the Bill yet not bothering to vote against it. I am not quite sure where they are coming from. It seemed clear even from the opening statement from the shadow Front Bench that this is not about the content of the Bill; it is an attempt to refight the referendum over and over again, and to talk about how they did not want to leave the EU at all.

The scaremongering about how this might affect medical isotopes or safety and numerous other aspects during the lengthy discussion of this Bill bears no indication that the UK will not turn its back on continuity and ensure that Britain’s high standards of nuclear safeguarding are maintained after we leave. It is a vital contingency plan to ensure that if we do end up with no deal—which no one wants, blah blah blah—[Laughter]—we are ready for that eventuality. That was not meant as a “filler”, but there is no point in going over the same old argument again.

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The scaremongering about how this might affect medical isotopes or safety and numerous other aspects during the lengthy discussion of this Bill bears no resemblance to what is down on paper. The Bill is about delivering continuity for the industry in the UK and giving us the opportunity to forge ahead in this field in the future.

9.20 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), and to be called to participate in this fascinating and wide-ranging debate. We have heard tonight about gramophones, “Dr Strangelove”, beefing up, belts and braces, “blah blah blah”, and the “neverendum”, but we did hear a lot of sense in the contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison).

Security of our energy is paramount—on a daily basis in our lives, for every one of us in our hospitals and schools, and in terms of our daily safety. Securing the position of the UK as an international nuclear state is therefore vital as we pave our way out of the EU.

As we heard from the Secretary of State at the start of the debate, this is a simple and prudent Bill whose message is timely. This evening, the fact that the Government are actively working through this Bill to ensure that the UK continues to meet our international obligations for nuclear safeguards while also continuing the UK’s reputation as a responsible nuclear state has been warmly welcomed. Let us be clear: the UK will continue to support Euratom, and in the meantime we will seek, through this Bill, continuity on co-operation and standards.

I believe the Bill will bolster the roles and responsibilities of the UK’s existing nuclear regulator, the Office for Nuclear Regulation, once we leave Euratom. Despite “Project Fear”, which we have heard a lot about tonight, the collaboration between scientists and those in the nuclear sector is vitally important to all aspects of our co-operation. The Government want, and, more importantly, intend, to see this continue. It is clear at the outset that the industrial strategy includes nuclear and supports the scientific community through this, and builds on that through Brexit. While the Opposition refuse to accept the public’s decision to leave the European Union, the Government continue to get on with the job of ensuring a responsible withdrawal.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is highly appropriate that this should be the first piece of oven-ready Brexit legislation, as that shows the importance of this industry and of safeguards in it?

Mims Davies: So we can add “oven-ready” to “boil in the bag” Brexit, perhaps; yes, it is the latest example of that important vote. As we heard this evening from my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), what we are doing as we leave the EU really matters in terms of the message we give to our constituents. Those on both sides of the argument are seeing us preparing for what is going to happen.

Let us make no mistake about this: the Opposition have no care for the nuclear industry, they do not support the vital role that it plays within our energy mix, and they do not respect the jobs and communities that rely on it. We heard that this evening from my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland: in an excellent and rounded speech on the industry and what it means to her constituency, we heard a lot about what the impact on her community would be if we got this wrong, and that applies across the UK. In stark contrast to the Opposition, the Government stand ready to take up the important role of protecting our world-leading nuclear industry during and before Brexit, so we can enable the UK to continue to meet its international nuclear obligations as it leaves Euratom.

I will therefore be strongly supporting this Bill this evening, and hope that all Opposition Members will follow Conservatives in doing so.

9.24 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). The Hansard editors will now have to work out how to spell “blah blah blah” as well as “blah-di-blah”.
I am a natural optimist, but if the House will allow me I want to strike a slightly cautionary note at the beginning of my speech. Leaving the European Union was always going to be difficult. We have been members of the EU, and of Euratom, for 44 years and these are some of the complexities that we will have to deal with over the coming years if we are to make a success of leaving the European Union. Additionally, the European Union was always going to be difficult about this because it does not want us to leave. The negotiations will be difficult. It is also quite clear from their recent remarks that most Opposition Members—not many of whom are present at this time of the evening—are going to be difficult and try to frustrate the process.

However, difficult and impossible are two different things. I believe that the Prime Minister is taking the right approach in her negotiations with the European Union. On the one hand, she made a conciliatory and generous speech in Florence in setting out the terms that we were prepared to work on; on the other hand, she has stated clearly and quite rightly that we will prepare for no deal. The Bill is about preparing for no deal on Euratom, although Members across the House clearly want us to strike such a deal. It is no wonder that the Opposition do not think that this is necessary. We know from the shadow Chancellor’s comments yesterday on “The Andrew Marr Show” that Labour would not accept no deal in any circumstances. That means that they would accept the worst possible deal if that was the only deal on the table. It was also made clear in Labour’s manifesto that it would accept the worst possible deal rather than walk away with no deal. That is the most naïve negotiating stance I have ever heard of. The shadow Business Secretary must agree that that is not the right approach to take in any negotiations.

It is absolutely right that we should make provision in the Bill for the nuclear industry, which is very important for the UK’s economy and for our energy needs. Nuclear already supplies around 21% of our electricity, and that will grow to around 42% by 2050. As some Members will know, I have shale gas in my constituency and I am often lobbied by shale gas protesters who say that we do not have an appropriate policy on energy and renewables. I want to pay tribute to the strategic approach that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is taking to meeting the energy needs of this country. We absolutely have a future in renewables, and nuclear will play a key part in that.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill is also about building public confidence, and that developing civil nuclear power is separate from anything being used for military purposes? That is why these safeguards are absolutely right. They make it clear that civil nuclear is completely separate from any other objectives.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Civil nuclear is a key part of our energy requirements and, in turn, of our economy.

It might surprise Members—and certainly members of the wider public—to learn that the UK is the third best performing nation on the planet in the international climate change performance index. We are ahead of every country you could name apart from France and Germany. We have a strategic policy around nuclear and renewables that will continue to put this country at the forefront of the green energy industry. We are also investing in other important areas in relation to nuclear power.

The Minister recently said that the Government would continue to support the Taurus fusion project. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) said, the future capability of fusion has been talked about for some time. Indeed, when I was studying physics at Sheffield Polytechnic, which is now Sheffield Hallam University, a limitless supply of clean energy from fusion was talked about as the future. The nuclear industry of course also provides many jobs in the supply chain. My constituency—the bucolic rural idyll of Thirsk and Malton—has James Fisher Nuclear, the Derwent Training Association, which trains new generations of engineers for the sector, and many other such jobs.

All the Bill does is add a safeguarding responsibility to the safety responsibilities of the Office for Nuclear Regulation to ensure that we make good on our commitments under non-proliferation treaties. It will also implement our voluntary commitments with the IAEA. People may ask, “Can the UK have its own policy? Will it be too difficult for the UK to manage its own nuclear responsibilities or put the necessary regulations in place?” Clearly not. The Euratom countries obviously use that body to look after its nuclear interests, but most other countries do that independently. The UK has a long history of nuclear energy dating back to 1956, so we clearly have the experience and knowledge. We can, if necessary, place the current Euratom provisions under the Office for Nuclear Regulation to continue the quality, safe and robust regulations that we have been used to in this country. I commend the Bill to the House.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I may be the last speaker before the wind-ups, but it is none the less a pleasure to contribute to this debate and to follow the eloquent speeches and learned contributions that we have heard. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) spoke with such knowledge of the nuclear industry—far more than many of us.

This afternoon has demonstrated the importance of the nuclear industry, which we should not underestimate in our deliberations. Not only is it important to the UK economy, to jobs and the local supply chain and to our nation’s security, but at its heart is the security of the UK’s energy supplies. As we have heard, the UK’s first commercial nuclear power station opened back in 1956. Today, 15 reactors generate a not insignificant 21% of our electricity, so nuclear is a vital source of energy in the UK. Aside from power stations, the civilian uses of nuclear materials extend to medicine, farming, transport and other industrial processes. Nuclear is a key strategic industry that affects us all, including each and every one of my constituents. This Government’s commitment to electric vehicles means that nuclear will have a further strategic importance in the UK. As someone whose household has recently purchased an electric vehicle, I have an added interest in this field, including in making note of where the UK’s charging points are and are not.
However, this is a serious, specific debate about safeguards. It is not, as we have heard, about safety. The Bill was first announced in the Queen’s Speech to establish a UK nuclear safeguards regime as we leave the EU and Euratom, ensuring that the UK continues to meet international standards for nuclear safeguards while—this is important—continuing the UK’s reputation as a responsible nuclear state.

In this place we are understandably focused on Brexit. We are ensuring that we get the best deal for our country in the withdrawal process, and the Bill is a key part of that process. We often talk about the need to maintain stability and avoid the cliff edge we hear about as we exit the EU, and this is a prime example of legislation that is about preparedness and doing the ground work in readiness for when we leave the EU.

The Government have made it clear that future safeguard arrangements will continue to provide the safety, quality and robustness that currently exist under Euratom. The Secretary of State set out clearly that the EU and Euratom are uniquely legally joined, to which some Opposition Members take exception, and it means that when we formally notified the EU of our intention to leave, we also commenced the process of leaving Euratom.

Put simply, this contingency Bill is intrinsically and uniquely linked to the result of the referendum on 23 June 2016. I will be voting for the Bill this evening. My constituents and the country voted in the referendum, 23 June 2016. I will be voting for the Bill this evening. My constituents and the country voted in the referendum, and we voted to leave the EU. The Bill will help ensure that the UK remains committed to having nuclear safeguards by enabling the UK to set up a domestic safeguard regime so that we continue to meet international safeguard and nuclear non-proliferation standards.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) said, this is a responsible Bill from a responsible Government who are delivering a responsible Brexit.

9.36 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) struck the right note when she said this is a serious debate. We have to discuss these issues with due seriousness, and my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) clearly set out our serious concerns about the Bill in her opening contribution.

The Bill should be unnecessary, and the Opposition hope it may yet be so. What the Government should be doing is setting their goal as the UK’s continued participation in Euratom as a member, if possible, or as close to that relationship as we can get. There is a lot of cross-party agreement on that goal—I exempt the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who extravagantly celebrated our crashing out of Euratom—but in the Westminster Hall debate on the issue back in July, ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who is a champion of this sector, even the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who was here earlier and who is not a noted dove on these issues, said that we should be working “towards something like associate membership.”—[Official Report, 12 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 96WH.]

It appeared then that the barrier to that relationship was the role of the European Court of Justice, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) pointed out. Indeed, the former chief of staff to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the former Chancellor of the Exchequer have both suggested that that is why Euratom was linked to the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017, and the responsibility for that lies with the Prime Minister. It is deeply irresponsible to put our nuclear industry at risk because of a reckless and ideological decision to make the future role of the ECJ a red line in all matters relating to Brexit.

As hon. Members have pointed out, and as the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said in his opening remarks, the Bill provides for safeguarding arrangements for all civilian nuclear facilities in the UK, which is clearly needed if we leave Euratom, but that is only one part of what is at risk. The wider issues were exercised in the Government’s own position paper, which was issued over the summer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) pointed out, Euratom oversees the transport of nuclear fuel across the EU and enables vital co-operation on information, infrastructure and funding of nuclear energy. It is the legal owner of all nuclear material, and the legal purchaser, certifier and guarantor of any nuclear materials and technologies that the UK purchases. That includes, for example, our nuclear trade with the United States.

Euratom has helped us become a world leader in nuclear research and development. In their position paper on the issue, the Government rightly said that they want a “close and working relationship” with Euratom, and we welcome that. That position paper set out six high-level principles for nuclear materials and safeguards that would frame their approach to the issue. So may I ask the Minister to explain why the Bill fails to address five of those six high-level principles, which are the Government’s own objectives?

Why is the Bill so limited in its scope? Is that because the Government aim to secure ongoing membership and have just brought this Bill forward as a contingency? Will the Minister confirm the answer that I understood the Secretary of State to give to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill): that it is the Government’s intention to seek associate membership? Is it because their thinking has not advanced sufficiently on all the other issues connected with our membership of Euratom? Or is it, as was said by some of the more excitable Conservative Members, such as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), that they are looking forward to crashing out of Euratom—[Interruption.] Perhaps “excitable” was not quite the right word, but he was working towards it. Given that the Prime Minister has talked it up, will the Minister say what work has been done on a no-deal scenario in the event that we leave Euratom in the way that some Conservative Members would seem to like?

Tom Pursglove: Is not the whole purpose of a Bill such as this to stop anybody crashing out? The hon. Gentleman is using totally irresponsible language.

Paul Blomfield: I agree that it is irresponsible language and I am sorry to have heard it from some Conservative Members during this debate.

This is an important issue and the sector is hugely important, as the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) pointed out in a thoughtful and informed contribution when she said that it is important that we
[Paul Blomfield]

get this right. The Government therefore need to answer some key questions. The ONR cannot exercise these new powers until it has a voluntary offer agreement and additional protocol from the IAEA for a UK safeguards regime. What work has been done on that and when do the Government anticipate that will be ratified? What have the Government done to ensure that the ONR has the necessary skills to take on the safeguarding of nuclear material? Euratom employs 160 people on safeguarding, 25% of whom work on UK installations, whereas the ONR currently employs eight staff. I understand that it takes five years to train a nuclear safeguards inspector. Two years will not be long enough to reskill the necessary number of inspectors. Are plans under way to re-employ the current Euratom officials or do the Government have another contingency up their sleeve?

Dr Drew: The problem is that the nuclear industry is not currently able to call on that level of expertise. It already suffers because of a shortage of labour in many parts of the industry, so that can only get worse.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which I am coming straight to. As a number of Members have mentioned, it is planned to halve the current Government grant to the ONR by 2020. I recognise that this is only one part of the ONR’s funding, but can the Minister confirm that that is no longer the Government’s intention? Will he outline what their new funding plans would be, given the additional responsibilities they are seeking to place on the ONR?

An important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), and echoed by some others, was that outside Euratom the Government would have to negotiate individual nuclear collaboration agreements not simply with Euratom, but with every country outside of the EU with which we currently co-operate through our membership, including the US, China, Canada, Australia, Kazakhstan and South Korea. The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) mentioned the example of the United States. A section 123 agreement with the US—a legal necessity if we are to trade nuclear goods with the US—would have to go through the Senate and the House of Representatives, with final sign-off needed from the President. Does the Minister really believe it is possible to achieve that in time we have left?

What provisions have been put in place to ensure that normal business in the UK is not disrupted? As the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) pointed out, an important part of that will be ensuring that the UK has the right skills to build, operate and decommission nuclear power stations. What will be the Government’s migration policy for the nuclear worker who previously enjoyed free movement under the provision of the Euratom treaty?

A key benefit of the UK’s involvement in Euratom has been our participation in R and D programmes. The Government have given limited commitments on Culham, but what are their wider intentions on the full Euratom work programme from 2019-20 onward?

Seventeen months does not give us much time to resolve such a huge number of issues. The paralysis at the heart of the negotiations, created by the divisions at the heart of the Government, do not give us much confidence that the issues can be resolved within the time available. One further key question: will the Government seek to continue membership of Euratom—or to come to an arrangement that replicates the benefits and responsibilities of that membership—for a transitional period after we leave the EU in March 2019?

The Bill is inadequate. It fails to address so many of the vital questions that the Government themselves raised in their own position paper. It gives the Secretary of State powers to amend legislation without reference to the House—powers that, although narrower in scope, in many ways go further than those in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. For these reasons, we cannot support it. Nevertheless, we recognise that, if the worst comes to the worst—as some Government Members seem to anticipate—and we crash out without agreement, we would be in breach of our international responsibilities under the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons if we do not have a safeguarding regime in place. For that reason, we will seek to amend the Bill significantly in Committee, but we will not oppose it tonight.

9.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I apologise, Mr Speaker, because I nearly called you Madam Speaker. I turned around and you were there, and I feel a lot better knowing that you are at the helm.

I have listened carefully to the arguments in this debate about our country’s future nuclear safeguards regime. I thank Members from all parties for their contributions, but particularly my right hon. and hon. Friends, so many of whom spoke. I am encouraged by the general consensus in the House on one fundamental point: the UK nuclear industry and nuclear research community—both of which have an excellent global reputation—are key assets and must be supported. I promise that we will do nothing to endanger that.

Regardless of where Members stand on membership, associate membership, transition or departure from Euratom—people have used various pronunciations today—I hope we can all agree that it is sensible and prudent to take the powers contained in the Bill, as they are necessary to set up our domestic nuclear safeguards regime. However, there has been a lot of scaremongering—that word has been used. I hope that Opposition Members did not intend to frighten people unnecessarily with certain comments, because I would have to call that “Project Fear”.

I can state categorically that, first, the Bill is nothing to do with medical isotopes and fissile materials are excluded; secondly, we are not going to crash out with no arrangements; and thirdly, important though nuclear safety is, it is nothing to do with nuclear safeguards. The Bill is the Nuclear Safeguards Bill. We have consistently repeated that, but unfortunately—[Interruption.] I was going to say that unfortunately the shadow Minister is nodding, but I know he is nodding because he knows. Other Members, particularly those on the SNP Benches, have confused the two.

On the triggering of article 50—this has been mentioned several times—the European Commission stated very clearly to the European Parliament:

“It is recalled that in accordance with Article 106(a) of the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community, Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union applies also to the European Atomic Energy Community.”
Given that article 50 has been triggered and that the European Commission has said that that was the right decision, we believe that it is absolutely essential that we have a constructive and co-operative relationship with our European partners.

Rachel Reeves rose—

Richard Harrington: I would love to give way to the Chair of the BEIS Select Committee, but I have very little time. I do hope that she will understand—\[Interruption.\] Oh, all right.

Rachel Reeves: What a gentleman! Thank you very much.

The Minister is setting out two alternatives: the ONR taking responsibility or our staying in Euratom. However, there is a third way forward—a third way—which is to seek a transition period in which we remain in Euratom and then go for some sort of associate membership of Euratom. Are the Government exploring that opportunity, which would best serve our industry and those jobs?

Richard Harrington: Well, I do know that the Chair of the Select Committee is a well-known Blairite, but actually to quote Mr Blair is very impressive. We leave Euratom at the same time as we leave the European Union.

Rachel Reeves rose—

Richard Harrington: I really must make some progress.

As we have heard, there are other issues of great importance, such as access to skilled workers and continued R and D collaboration, on which we are focused as we seek to establish our new relationship with Europe’s nuclear community. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), asked me why those points are not included in the Bill. It was a fair question, but let me tell him that they are part of Euratom’s activities that are subject to negotiation but do not require legislation.

I was not surprised to hear all of the concerns expressed today—I would be astonished if the House did not have concerns and questions given the novel circumstances that we now find ourselves in. No country has ever left the EU or Euratom before. Let me explain for the avoidance of doubt that this is not an alternative. This is not because we do not want to maintain our successful civil nuclear co-operation with Euratom. We must set our own nuclear safeguards regime. It would be irresponsible for us not to do so. We are using the body that already regulates nuclear safety and security—the ONR. The shadow Minister said that it has only eight suitable employees at the moment. That is why we are here today—we need to ensure that the Bill has all the provisions both in terms of IT and infrastructure, and we need to recruit all the necessary people. That is why we are taking the powers, why they are so important and why the Bill is so vital and deserves support from across the House. We want to have—and we will have—a domestic nuclear safeguards regime that will enable the UK to meet international safeguards and nuclear non-proliferation standards after we withdraw from Euratom.

The intention is for the new domestic regime to exceed the standard that the international community would expect from the UK as a member of the IAEA. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out, we are aiming to establish a robust regime as comprehensive as that currently provided by Euratom.

Some hon. Members have asked why the Bill has been introduced and brought to its Second Reading so quickly—in fact, within a few days. That is because we know how important it is to have a safeguards regime for the UK. The ONR is key to that, and it needs the time to carry out both the recruitment and the planning. The international community, which we deal with all the time, wants to know that the safeguards regime will be established well before March 2019. I wish to thank EDF Energy, which is constructing our new Hinkley Point nuclear power station, and all of the other people in the nuclear industry, whom I briefed just before introducing this Bill last week, for their support in what we are doing here. The Bill is absolutely critical.

The Opposition have raised some issues about the powers in the Bill and the way in which we have approached the measures. The shadow Secretary of State said that there were too many delegated powers, Henry VIII provisions and all those sorts of thing. In fact, there is one Henry VIII power, which is limited and necessary because it enables us to alter references to the United Kingdom’s agreements with the IAEA. We would not be able to license the inspectors, for example, without concluding these negotiations, which are currently trilateral between the UK, Euratom and the agency.

The bulk of discussions with the European Union are ongoing. We are exploring a number of options for smooth transition from the currently regime to a domestic one. The negotiations are going well. We have found a spirit of co-operation because the officials in Europe and ourselves have a big mutuality of interests, but we have to plan just in case suitable arrangements are not worked out. Shared interests are important and we know that we will provide the best possible basis for continued close co-operation with Euratom, although we cannot say exactly how that will be. It will be similar when we negotiate our bilateral nuclear co-operation agreements, about which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) made a rather excellent speech. He actually thanked me for harassing him in the Tea Room, which I will now always try to do. He mentioned the importance of and concerns about the bilateral nuclear co-operation agreements, which are already in place with several countries and will continue. My officials have been to the other countries concerned and I am certain that talks will progress well.

I am happy to meet the representative from the Royal College of Radiologists to discuss the concerns of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I had hoped that I had reassured her, but I perfectly understand her point and am happy to meet the relevant people. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) made an excellent speech. The ONR has already started building processes and systems and recruiting inspectors, and the essential funding will be in place to do that.

I have heard many considered views from both sides of the House, but I hope that the House will unite in recognition of the special contribution of the nuclear industry. The Opposition have said that they will not vote against Second Reading, which is responsible, but I look forward to a lengthy and constructive discussion in
[Richard Harrington]

Committee and on Report. I can tell from the polite smiles from the Opposition Front Benchers that they will be raring to go and I welcome that. Quite apart from in Committee, I am happy to sit down and discuss the Bill with anybody on an individual basis. I am passionate about it because we really need this domestic nuclear safeguards regime, regulated by the regulator here. It should be as robust and comprehensive as that provided by Euratom or by any international operation. I am sorry that I have not been able to take every intervention, but my door is always open. I very much look forward to the remaining stages of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.
Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Business without Debate

NUCLEAR SAFEGUARDS BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83 A (7 ) ),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Nuclear Safeguards Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.
Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 16 November 2017.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.
Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Graham Stuart.)

Question agreed to.

NUCLEAR SAFEGUARDS BILL (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52 (1) (a) ),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act of money so provided.—(Graham Stuart.)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,
That, at the sitting on Tuesday 17 October—

(1) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), the private business set down by the Chairman of Ways and Means may be entered upon at any hour (whether before, at or after 4.00pm) and may then be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of;

(2) notwithstanding sub-paragraph (2)(c), as applied by paragraph (4), of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business), the backbench business set down for consideration may be entered upon at any hour, and may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, after which the Speaker shall interrupt the business.—(Graham Stuart.)

COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: We now come to motion 5 relating to the Backbench Business Committee, but I advise the House that there are several other motions up to and including motion 13. These matters fall within the auspices of the Chair of the Committee of Selection, who is in his place, looking eager and expectant and ready to move the motion. I trust that, with the leave of the House, we can take motions 5 to 13 together.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is not the Chairman of the Committee of Selection for nothing. I meant that in the most positive way, but it is probably true in more ways than one.

Ordered,

BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE

That Robert Courts be a member of the Backbench Business Committee.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

That Vernon Coaker be a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

That Rehman Chishti be a member of the Home Affairs Committee.

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

That Bob Stewart be a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

PETITIONS COMMITTEE

That Damien Moore be a member of the Petitions Committee.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

That Vicky Ford, Adam Holloway and Stephanie Peacock be members of the Science and Technology Committee.

WELSH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

That Tonia Antoniazzi, Simon Hoare and Anna McMorrin be members of the Welsh Affairs Committee.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

That Eddie Hughes be a member of the Women and Equalities Committee.
WORK AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE

That Andrew Bowie, Jack Brereton and Chris Green be members of the Work and Pensions Committee.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Mr Speaker: We come now to the petition—[Interruption.] It is unaccountable and incomprehensible that Members do not wish to hear the presentation of the petition, given its likely content and the identity of its proposer, but if Members do insist on leaving the Chamber, I should be most grateful if they did so quickly and quietly, conducting their private conversations outside the Chamber rather than noisily in it. In fact, some of them are so absorbed in their noisy conversations that they are not even conscious that they are being advised not to conduct them, but I feel sure that those noisy Members are now departing the Chamber and we are immensely grateful to them.

PETITION

Law relating to travelling communities

10 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I do not want to detain the House for too long, but I rise to present a petition relating to the conduct of travelling communities in my constituency that, unfortunately, caused great damage over the course of this year. I want to put on the record my thanks to my colleagues, Councillors Ian Ward, Marje Bridle and John Cotton for how they handled the situation.

The terms of the petition, from constituents in the Shard End ward in my constituency, are self-explanatory. It states:

The petition of constituents of Hodge Hill, declares that we are blighted by the disruption of travelling communities repeatedly moving onto public green space and causing significant damage.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to change the law to allow instant eviction, rather than waiting the 48 hours now required by law.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

National House Building Council

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

10.3 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): High on the list of priorities for many people in our country is the desire to own their own home. Indeed, a recent British social attitudes survey found that 86% of those asked said that they wanted to buy their own home. The UK has a long heritage of home ownership, which sets us up as different and distinct from many of our European neighbours. As the saying goes, an Englishman's home is his castle. I am sure that that is also true of the Scottish, the Welsh, the Irish and, indeed, the Cornish. It is in our culture that we value highly that little bit of the country that we own and call home.

There is no doubt that our country faces a huge challenge with the housing market. Demand, for all sorts of reasons, outstrips supply. The Government are right to encourage new house building—those houses need to be in the right places, through plan-led development, and they need the infrastructure and services to support them. There is no doubt, however, that we need to increase the supply of housing in our nation. I welcome the new extension of the Help to Buy scheme that will help first-time buyers to get on the property ladder and achieve the dream of owning their own home with only a 5% deposit. However, if we are to achieve the aim of building hundreds of thousands of homes that people will purchase and thus participate in our capitalist democracy, we need to ensure that they can be confident that those homes will be of a good quality in both design and construction.

While the majority of new homeowners are satisfied with the build quality, minor issues aside, figures from the Home Builders Federation and the National House Building Council show that a staggering 27% of buyers said that their homes had more problems than they were expecting. One national house builder recently saw its share value plummet by 10% on the news that it has set aside a staggering £7 million to resolve what have been described as “customer service problems”. With contracts signed, deadlines agreed, and maybe a chain involved, buyers have little or no option but to move into their new home, despite it sometimes not being finished to their satisfaction.

Often new homebuyers discover faults and poor workmanship that go way beyond reasonable, and even understandable, snagging. Some faults and problems are very serious indeed. So just when buyers are at their most vulnerable, too many discover serious building defects. No doubt when faults emerge, they look to the 10-year warranty almost universally offered on new homes. Several companies offer such products, but the market is dominated by the NHBC, which has roughly 80% of the market. In essence, for the first two years the builder is responsible for remedial works. If there is a dispute, then the warranty company will act as adjudicator, or if the builder is no longer trading, the warranty company steps in. After two years, the warranty company takes responsibility for the remaining eight years. The 10-year warranty is presented as a benefit and reassurance to the new homeowner.

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And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002062]
John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend is talking about quite serious snagging problems, and slightly worse. Would he, like me, put more emphasis on getting those who produce neighbourhood plans to spend more time on making sure that the design is right rather than waiting for the buildings to be built and then people finding the snagging?

Steve Double: I agree that we need to put more attention into the design of the housing that we are building rather than just building to the usual design standards.

The experience of many is that when they take out the 10-year warranty, the insurers routinely resort to delay and obfuscation, denying and hindering legitimate claims for truly shocking examples of poor workmanship and defects or offering cost-cutting remedial works that fall short of producing a satisfactory solution.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem with many of the big house builders, such as the one he alluded to that set aside a large contingency fund for these issues, partly stems from the fact that they have no workforce of their own, particularly no site managers and the like? Interestingly, that company said recently that it would not support the levy continuing for the Construction Industry Training Board, which is having to be subsidised by architects and small builders, and not by the large house builders that we should arguably be holding more to account?

Steve Double: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention; she makes a very good point. At the heart of this problem is the quality control on building sites. Too often, subcontractors are used and there is not the level of management oversight of the quality of their workmanship that there has been in the past and that we need to see today.

I have been seeking to assist a couple in my constituency who had obvious and serious problems with their new-build house. They first discovered the serious defects with their newly built property eight weeks after taking possession. Four years later, they are still fighting their case. They purchased their brand new house for £395,000. The most recent estimate of the cost of rectifying all the faults and defects comes to £325,000. That is truly shocking, and it is surely a sign of the complete failure of the inspection regime. The level of defect is such that somebody must have known about the problems before completion.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Is he aware of an organisation in my constituency called Casa Snaggers? It is an independent snagging company based in Launceston. Does he think that it might help to resolve issues of the sort faced by the couple in St Austell?

Steve Double: I thank my hon. Friend and Cornish neighbour for that intervention. I have heard of that company, and getting an independent inspection of a new property before signing the completion papers is one way to address the issue.

Jo Churchill: Surely the fundamental point is that when someone spends nearly £400,000 on a product, they expect, under their consumer rights, that product to be fit for purpose—a house should stand under its own construction and be there for the duration. We should be asking for that, rather than relying on a third-party snagging company.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I was alluding to the fact that in the current system, getting an independent view of the property is worthwhile. Long term, I do not think that that is the answer. We need to get to the point where a house purchaser can be confident in the quality of the housing that they are buying.

I return to the situation of the couple I have been assisting in my constituency. It transpires that similar defects have emerged on several other houses on the development, adding to the couple's anxiety and consternation. They said to me that far from being helped by the 10-year warranty company provider, they felt thwarted at every turn. They were sent around in circles and left for months on end with unhelpful responses or, indeed, no response at all. They said that far from working with them to resolve the matter, the warranty company appeared to be in cahoots with the developer. I believe that that is at the heart of the issue that I want to address. The perception is that NHBC has a too cosy relationship with the building companies, and lines are blurred as to precisely who they work for. That cannot be acceptable.

My own interaction with NHBC has been very unsatisfactory. I first became involved in the case before I was elected in 2015, and I have spent almost three years trying to assist progress, to very little avail—that is, until recently. It is notable that since notice of this debate was published, I have had direct and constructive contact from NHBC’s chief executive, Steve Wood. He phoned me just last week and admitted that my constituents had been let down by the system. He said that he was determined not only to resolve their case, but to ensure that NHBC improved its service. Having spoken to Steve Wood, who has only been in post for three months, I am more hopeful that things may change for the better. However, although that response is welcome, an MP should not have to secure a debate in this House before the NHBC takes some action. New homeowners should be confident of getting the service they are entitled to without the intervention of their Member of Parliament.

Although I accept that many customers of NHBC will be satisfied with the service they have received, it is clear that far too many are being let down. Therefore, I believe that we need a review of the new homes warranty market. My constituents spoke to me of being thwarted and foiled at every turn, and that has proved to be a startlingly accurate description of the experience of other new homeowners across the country, as has recently been reported in the press.

One issue that has come to light is that NHBC has close ties with some developers, and that it operates a washout system of premium refunds. Once policies have expired, NHBC pays back to the builders a proportion of the fees paid for the policies—reportedly amounting to tens of millions of pounds—as a reward for, or in recognition of, a low or no-claims record. Between them, they have a vested, incestuous interest that is in conflict with the benefit and welfare of the very people they purport to act for—the homeowners. There is a
clear blurring of lines about whom the warranty company actually represents. The builder pays the premium, and if no claims are made, it gets a rebate. No wonder builders do all they can at times to avoid agreeing to a claim.

**Jo Churchill:** Is my hon. Friend aware of whether any statistics on this are collected by the Department so that it can understand which builders are particularly poor and allow planners or other people to get involved at an earlier point?

**Steve Double:** I am aware of what has been reported in the press, but I am sure that those data should be available, given the way in which the NHBC operates. That could certainly be followed up.

There appears to be a closed shop or old boys’ network, with the industry looking after itself, rather than the consumer. By contrast, recent legislation has strengthened consumer rights further, so that faulty goods can be rejected and a full refund obtained, but not so with housing. Homes are specifically excluded from the Sale and Supply of Goods Act 1994. The homeowner has far more consumer rights and protection for a new kettle in their kitchen than they do for the new building that houses it. For the vast majority of people, buying a new home will be the biggest purchase they ever make, and surely we should provide more adequate protection for them. On the thankfully very rare occasions when the builder has completely failed to construct a property fit for habitation, house purchasers should not have to resort to the courts to establish their rights. Sadly, that is too often the case in the current set-up.

Building houses is high on the Government’s agenda, and with plans for 1 million homes to be constructed, now is the time to ensure they are built well, are fit for purpose and consistently fulfil the reasonable expectations of those who buy them. When something goes wrong, there should also be a system in place to protect the purchaser. A recent report by the all-party group for excellence in the built environment made a number of recommendations. I urge the Minister to read the report and to consider its recommendations. As well as calling for a review of the warranty market, the all-party group also called for the introduction of an independent housing ombudsman.

**Jo Churchill:** I chair the all-party group, which for reasons of clarity, I thought I should declare.

**Steve Double:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that clarification. I was not aware who the new chair was, and I am delighted to hear that it is my hon. Friend.

I believe the introduction of an independent ombudsman would be an important move, and I ask the Minister to consider it. By its very existence, an independent ombudsman would bring urgently needed fresh focus to the industry. As ever, it is far easier and cheaper to get it right first time. The prospect of an independent body adjudicating will in itself produce a new impetus to achieve a better outcome more often.

I look forward to the Minister’s response. May I finish by inviting him to visit my constituency in Cornwall so that I can show him some of the problems that my constituents face and he can see them for himself? His visit would be welcomed by exasperated homeowners and provide convincing further evidence of the need to bring fresh order to the industry.

10.18 pm

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this debate on consumer protection for new home buyers and the National House Building Council. We have had some powerful interventions from colleagues, and I am extremely pleased that my hon. Friend has been working so hard to assist his constituents. It is good to know that the NHBC has now responded, and I wish him well in taking forward that individual case.

On house building in general, earlier this year we published our housing White Paper, which highlights the need to fix our broken housing market and sets out how we will tackle this. Of course, just building more new homes is not good enough. We expect all house builders to deliver good quality housing on time and to treat new house buyers fairly. My hon. Friend talked about homes being in the right place—I absolutely agree—and the important role that local people play in neighbourhood plans and deciding where development goes in an area.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, delivering good quality homes does not always happen in the sector. He referred to the Home Builders Federation survey, so perhaps I can elaborate and share some further statistics from it. The latest HBF survey concludes that 98% of new homeowners report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected. A staggering 25% of buyers reported more than 16 problems. The latest survey shows that 84% of new homebuyers report problems to the builder. Of course, some will be snagging issues, but although some problems may be hard to prevent initially, 38% of buyers had more problems than they expected.

Customer satisfaction is important to many home builders, but others need to make it a priority. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) made a pertinent point when she talked about the vertical fragmentation of the industry. As I have said to some of the major house builders, perhaps the industry needs to think more about employing people directly so that they have much more control of the quality of what is built, as well looking at modern methods of construction.

After all, a home is not just one of the largest financial purchases, but one of the largest emotional commitments that people make. People bring up their families there, and it has treasured memories for many.

Alongside the actions the Government are taking, it is clear that homeowners need to step up and make quality and design a priority. That includes ensuring that, where something goes wrong, house builders and warranty providers fulfil their obligations to put things right.
There are existing mechanisms for redress, such as the consumer code for home builders and the independent resolution service, but they can be complex, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay said, they do not always provide full coverage. As he also noted, most new builds are covered by a warranty provider such as the NHBC 10-year Buildmark warranty. However, as he said, the cover offered by warranty providers varies and does not always match consumer expectations.

The all-party parliamentary group for excellence in the built environment produced a report called “More homes, fewer complaints”. It made a series of recommendations to improve quality and redress. I have read the report and it is a very good piece of work, and we are seriously considering the points that have been raised.

I have been encouraged by the fact that the industry will respond formally to the APPG’s report. The HBF has set up a working group and it will take forward action to provide better information to customers, simplify the legal process and create a clearer and simpler process for signing off new homes as complete. As some Members will know, the new working group has commissioned an independent report on consumer redress for new homebuyers, which is due to be published in the coming weeks. We expect that the report will demonstrate that there are gaps in the current redress arrangements and perhaps suggest some remedies. I will review the independent report, with a view to ensuring that improved redress arrangements are introduced to provide greater protection to consumers on a broad range of issues, with a greater degree of independence from the industry. I have heard the calls for a new homes ombudsman, which have been repeated a number of times in the House over the past few weeks, and I can tell hon. Members that I am considering that option very seriously indeed.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay also talked about design, as did other colleagues, and he is absolutely right: we need to improve the design quality of new build homes. The Government recognise that good design is an integral part of ensuring that we are building homes that people want to live in. We have put in place a robust framework that promotes and supports high-quality design. We want to create places, buildings and spaces that work well for everyone.

**Jo Churchill:** When my hon. Friend is considering design, will he also consider the space standards, which we have discussed before? It is important that families have homes that they can actually live in—that is, feed themselves in, relax in and then sleep in.

**Alok Sharma:** My hon. Friend makes an important point about space standards and the fact that we need spaces in our homes to do all the things that we want to as families. Houses in our country are generally much smaller than in some of our neighbouring countries in Europe, so she makes an important point.

I have talked about the importance of planning guidance and good design and about ensuring that advice on the planning processes and tools that local planning authorities can use to help to achieve that are in place. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who has been a great champion of neighbourhood planning, talked about the importance of neighbourhood plans, which I think are incredibly important. We want to strengthen the national planning policy framework to introduce an expectation that local and neighbourhood plans and development plan documents should set out clear design expectations.

Last week I attended an event hosted by the Royal Institute of British Architects, which brought together a group of experts from across the housing industry and Government. The aim of the event was to underline the Government’s commitment to design and to provide the sector with an opportunity to share its ideas with us for taking forward our ambition to improve the design quality of homes and places.

In closing, I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay again for securing this valuable debate, for his ongoing contribution to consumer protection for his constituents and for making the case for other homebuyers. As I have said, the Government want to see more homes built quickly, but crucially I want that development to take place with the engagement of local communities and with a focus on high quality and design. We will continue to work with industry, communities, developers and all those with a clear interest in consumer protection of new homes to ensure that, as the quantity and quality of new homes increase, consumer protection increases also.

**Question put and agreed to.**

10.28 pm

*House adjourned.*
of civilians in Libya.

UN Security Council member states on the protection discussions he has had with representatives from other Affairs (Boris Johnson):

I have regular discussions with the best prospect of security for all its people.

support of the United Nations plan for Libya, which in we can bring together the international community in with Italy, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates on how our P3 partners—the French and the Americans—and “they

deplored for stating that Sirte could be the new Dubai if they remain where they fell...It is insensitive to talk about those bodies as if they are some obstacle to British businessmen enjoying beer and sunbathing. The very least he should do is apologise to the families of the young men who died”?

Will the Foreign Secretary now directly apologise to those families today?

Boris Johnson: By far the best thing this Government and this House can do is to get behind the plan this Government are promoting to bring security to Libya and to Sirte, which would do honour to all those who fell fighting Daesh in Libya. That is the way forward for that country, and that is the course we are promoting.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that while the only way forward on Libya is for the international community to support Ghassan Salamé’s UN road map, the UK still has a unique part to play?

Boris Johnson: That is a very good point, because one of the difficulties in Libya over the last few months and years has been the tendency of actors across the international landscape to try to come up with their own plans, which has allowed the various parties in Libya to play one part of the international community off against another, and not to do the deals that are necessary. What needs to happen now is for the various parties in Libya to put aside their selfish interests and co-operate in the name of the country as a whole.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I am sure the Foreign Secretary agrees that the UK has a special responsibility to Libya, given the 2011 military action and the aftermath. How does he think his comments have impacted on the relationship?

Boris Johnson: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we have very good relations with all parties in Libya. One of our objectives, which remains undimmed, is to bring those parties together so as to form a unified Government of Libya.

Stephen Gethins: The Foreign Secretary is certainly right to say that he has managed to bring people together in Libya. Quite remarkably, he has been criticised across the political divide, as well as by a former British ambassador, and he was described as having “dishonoured” the sacrifice of those who fought and died in Sirte. Will
he now retract his comments, and will he tell us whether he is the best placed to take forward a relationship with Libya?

Boris Johnson: I do not believe that political point scoring of this kind or trivialising the reality—[Interruption.] Ignoring the reality of the security situation in Sirte does no favours to the people of Libya. They want to see the international community concerted and co-ordinated around the UN plan so that their children can have the opportunities that are currently being denied to their own generation in Libya. That is what we are working to achieve.

Kashmir

2. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What steps has he taken to support a negotiated settlement to the disputed status of Kashmir.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): As the hon. Lady will recognise, the UK’s long-standing position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting solution to the situation in Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK either to prescribe some sort of solution or to play a mediation role.

Helen Hayes: In the context of continued reports of human rights violations in Kashmir, will the Minister commit to placing human rights and a peace process for Kashmir firmly on the table as part of any new trade and labour market negotiations with India and Pakistan?

Mark Field: I am very happy to do that. I visited India only last month and was able to discuss the Kashmiri situation. I am hoping to go to Pakistan in the next few weeks, and I will do likewise there. I think all of us in the House recognise that there are human rights concerns throughout both India-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. We continue to encourage all states to ensure that domestic laws are in line with international standards but, as the hon. Lady rightly says, those human rights issues need to be taken into account when it comes to trade and all the other important work that goes on.

Thangam Debonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): There have been threats from both sides to target nuclear facilities, and talks at the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation have broken down, so what exactly will the Government and the Foreign Secretary do to defuse those tensions and promote dialogue?

Mark Field: Obviously we will do our part within the international community—as a member of the P5 at the UN, for example—to encourage all sides to maintain a positive dialogue, but the pace and scope of that must be for India and Pakistan to determine. We cannot insist on that. As I have said, we will continue to discuss the Kashmiri issue at every opportunity, both here in London, and out in Islamabad or New Delhi.

Somalia

3. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help to defeat terrorism in Somalia.

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): I should like to begin by expressing strong condolences on behalf of the British Government, and indeed the whole House, following the horrifying situation in Mogadishu—this was one of the largest bombs ever. Almost 300 people were killed and 500 were injured. As part of the United Kingdom’s response to that terrorist incident, we have provided support through the counter-terrorist police and the joint operations centre. More broadly, through the London Somalia conference, we are supporting the security infrastructure of the Somali state.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I join the Minister in offering heartfelt sympathy and prayers to President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo and his people at this dreadful time. This was the most lethal bomb ever let off in Africa, yet it has received minimal coverage in the west. What more can we do to redouble not only security input but our development efforts, so that we can give the Somali people hope for the future and enable them to triumph over this evil?

Rory Stewart: The UK Government are doing three things. First, we are providing £170 million in drought response to Somalia, where people are dying of starvation. Secondly, through the London Somalia conference, we have given new energy to the international community, and a focus on economic development and security. The most important thing we need to do at the moment, however, is to focus on the relationships between Mogadishu and the federal member states, where tensions are rising daily.

18. Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Like the Minister and the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), I offer my condolences to the people of Mogadishu following Saturday’s terrible incident. Al-Shabaab, which has claimed responsibility for the attack, has recruited fighters from this country in the shape of Thomas Evans and Samantha Lewthwaite, who were killed in 2015. What guarantee can the Minister give that people trained by terrorist groups such as al-Shabaab are not allowed back into the country, and that the authorities will come down on them if they do come back?

Rory Stewart: I want to reinforce how horrifying the attack was and emphasise the threat that al-Shabaab poses to Somalia and the broader regions, and to the United Kingdom. I also reiterate our absolute abhorrence of and determination to clamp down on any British citizen who involves themselves with a group of such extreme horror.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): On behalf of the Labour party, I associate myself with the comments about the despicable act by al-Shabaab in Mogadishu. Together with our European partners, we must step up our efforts to destroy that organisation and to help Somalia to achieve lasting peace and stability. To that end, will the Minister assure the House that, whatever the terms of our exit from the European Union, our joint efforts with the EU in Somalia will carry on in exactly the same way?

Rory Stewart: We remain very committed to working not only with the European Union but, critically, with the African Union, whose troops have taken a lot of
pain and sacrificed their lives to keep Somalia together. The US, the EU and the African Union need to work together until the Somali security forces can build themselves up to ensure that the progress that we have made over the past 10 years is guaranteed for the future.

**Cyprus**

4. Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support a negotiated solution to the disputed status of Cyprus.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Following the collapse of the Cyprus talks at Crans-Montana in Switzerland in July, there has inevitably been a pause in any further negotiations. We are encouraging all parties to reflect on any steps that they might now take towards constructive future talks.

Dan Carden: I thank the Minister for that answer. It is disappointing that the talks have collapsed, but more progress seemed to have been made at any point previously. Will he continue to work to put the human rights of all Cypriots at the top of the agenda?

Sir Alan Duncan: Like the hon. Gentleman, we all share the disappointment at the collapse of the talks. As he rightly says, they were as close as they have ever been, perhaps for decades, to reaching a settlement. Getting a unified Cyprus is the principal objective of the talks, in which human rights will of course play their proper part.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The UK Government have made it clear that they are not pressing to retain their status as a guarantor power in Cyprus. Will they advise the other guarantor powers that they are not pressing to retain their status as a guarantor power in Cyprus?

Sir Alan Duncan: Along with the UN, we remain flexible as a facilitator to try to bring about a unified Cyprus. However, our sovereign base areas will, of course, remain. They are not subject to negotiation, except in terms of some territory that we might cede, if that were to help.

**West Bank**

5. Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of instances of demolitions, settlement expansion and land appropriation in the west bank.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): We are gravely concerned by demolitions, by the eviction of Palestinians and by the increased pace of settlement advancement, including the discussions this week of plans for 3,000 new settlement units to be constructed on the west bank. Such actions undermine both the physical viability of the two-state solution and Israel’s commitment to it.

Julie Elliott: I thank the Minister for that answer. I recently visited the communities of Khan al-Ahmar and Susiya in Area C of the west bank, both of which are under threat of demolition. I was surprised that both have received significant investment from the EU and therefore from the British taxpayer. Will the Minister tell me what representations he has made to the Israeli Government about that?

Alistair Burt: I visited Susiya in August to talk to members of the community about the pressures that they were under. We maintain a continued interest in legal arguments in relation to both Khan al-Ahmar and Susiya, and we regularly make it clear to the Israeli authorities that activities there and other settlement actions are deeply concerning, and undermine the intentions that we all have for a viable two-state solution and a movement towards peace.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I join the Minister in agreeing that such settlements are not in any way conducive to peace, but does he agree that what is required in the end is a negotiated settlement involving the other countries in the region? That will inevitably involve an element of land swap, which the Palestinians have accepted in the past.

Alistair Burt: It does and, as many of us are aware, the outline of the parameters of a peace agreement, including some degree of land swaps, is known. However, the encroachment in recent years of Israeli settlements on areas well beyond those anticipated to be part of a future land swap undermines the credibility of the so-called commitment to that answer.

17. [901188] Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is 100 years since the Balfour declaration promised not just a Jewish homeland but to protect the rights of non-Jewish communities in Palestine. What I saw on the west bank during my recent visit amounts to conquest by concrete and totally undermines any possibility of a two-state solution. With Palestinian reconciliation providing new impetus, will the UK Government recognise their responsibility to re-establish a meaningful peace process?

Alistair Burt: We work extremely hard to play our part in fulfilling that second half of the Balfour declaration. I met one of the negotiators appointed by President Trump at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, and I was recently in Israel to talk to people there. We believe it is absolutely essential to make progress on the middle east peace process, which is not something to be managed but something to be solved, and the United Kingdom is bending all its efforts to seek to do so, particularly in this sensitive year.

23. [901194] [R] Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that Hezbollah poses a serious threat to Israel’s security and presents a significant barrier to peace in the middle east? Does he share my concern about recent reports that Iran has been constructing rocket factories for Hezbollah in Lebanon, and that the terrorists now have weapons capable of hitting any part of Israel?

Alistair Burt: The short answer is yes. Hezbollah appears to have been rearmed in recent years, and the conflict in Syria has provided the opportunity for Iran to supply more weapons—and more dangerous weapons—to Hezbollah. The possibility of a confrontation remains high. Those who have been committed to violence...
should renounce that commitment and make progress on reconciliation among the Palestinians on that basis, and all the parties involved should seek the peace we all want in the region.

Russia

6. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to improve Britain’s relationship with Russia.

Mr Sheerman: I urge the Secretary of State and his whole team to reread George Kennan’s famous 1947 article on containment, because Kennan predicted that the then Soviet Union, now Russia, would come forward to destabilise Europe, the United States and Japan. Will the Secretary of State also note what Hillary Clinton said yesterday: there is “a new…cold war and it is just getting started.”?

Boris Johnson: I remember reading George Kennan’s article many years ago and it contains much wisdom. The tragedy is that, in many ways, Russia is behaving as though there is a new cold war, and our objective is to prevent the situation from getting any worse by constraining Russia and ensuring that we penalise it for its malign and disruptive activities. However, it is also our objective to engage where we can, which is why I will be going to Russia later this year.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): A hundred years ago this month saw the start of the Russian revolution, which unleashed misery and purges against millions of Russian people. Although we are right to remind future generations and younger people about the evils of the past, for example through Holocaust Memorial Day, does my right hon. Friend agree that we owe it to the younger generation to educate them about the warped and failed Marxist-Leninist ideology that continues to unleash misery across the world? People should be very worried about that.

Boris Johnson: Absolutely. It is also worth reminding people that it was the Labour party that sneered at working people who tried to rise up against such regimes, and it was the Labour party that supported and connived in the repressive activities of Moscow for decades.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very unseemly. The hon. Lady is putting a pertinent inquiry to the Foreign Secretary, to which I know he will wish to listen undisturbed.

Jo Swinson: Amid reports that Russia is hacking into the smartphones of NATO troops and the ongoing revelations about the Russian online involvement in the US election, what is the Foreign Secretary’s assessment of the cyber threat posed to this country by Russia and what are his Government doing about it?

Boris Johnson: We are continually monitoring Russian activity in that sphere. I can tell the hon. Lady that the Russians have been up to all sorts of mischief in many countries, but so far we cannot yet pinpoint any direct Russian cyber-attacks on this country.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give the House an assessment of the impact of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 on Russian relations? Following on from the question asked by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), perhaps he will assure me and others in this House that this Act will be used to prevent corrupt, human rights-denying and human rights-abusing Russian oligarchs from using London to launder their ill-gotten gains?

Boris Johnson: I can tell my hon. Friend that only yesterday, at breakfast, I met Vladimir Kara-Murza, a distinguished leader of the Russian Opposition and a journalist, who paid tribute to this country for being one of the few European countries to implement what is, to all intents and purposes, a Magnitsky Act. People on this side of the House can be very proud of the role they have played—in fact, people on both sides of the House can.

Counter-terrorism

7. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to support implementation of the Government’s counter-terrorism strategy overseas.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Broadly speaking, there are two, mutually contaminating ecosystems of terror that we face, one is at home and one is abroad. What the UK is doing overseas is to drive out the terrorists from the spaces they currently occupy, be that in Iraq, Syria, Libya or Nigeria. We are having a great deal of success in that. The ungoverned space occupied by terrorists has been greatly reduced in the past year. In addition, we are working to increase aviation security around the world and, above all, at the UN, with the resolution agreed last month, to bring Daesh fighters to justice.

Mr Cunningham: Following last year’s decision to strip the Foreign Office of its responsibilities for co-ordinating the UK’s diplomatic counter-terrorism relationships, what reassurances can the Foreign Secretary provide that his Department’s unique expertise in this area is not being lost?

Boris Johnson: I believe the hon. Gentleman is referring to the JICTU—Joint International Counter Terrorism Unit—arrangement we have across government. I think
he would accept that in view of what I have said about the mutually contaminating ecosystems of terror that we face, where people are being radicalised online here at home and people are in the ungoverned spaces, be it in Iraq, Syria or wherever, a one-Government approach has to be taken to all this by Her Majesty's Government. It is right therefore that we co-ordinate with the Home Office to tackle this, but we are also tackling it overseas. One aspect of international diplomacy which the Prime Minister has been leading is countering online radicalisation and taking more than 270,000 pieces of illegal terrorist material off the internet.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): May I remind the Foreign Secretary that 20 million Russians died in the second world war, without which we might have lost the war? Does he agree with Sir Tony Brenton, the former British ambassador to Russia, that despite Russia's being a leading nuclear power, a member of the UN Security Council, a fundamental source of hydrocarbons and other vital raw materials, and a leading player in the middle east, we are, through "pointless sanctions" and "demonisation", doing everything we can "to push Russia into China's arms"?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out Russian sacrifice in the war. He is quite right to allude to it, although I might also point out that probably 30 million people died in Stalin's purges and famines and various other things associated with communism which, as I say, were indulged by the Labour party. [Interruption.] It is true. My hon. Friend's point about engagement is valid, and that is what we are doing.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): One of the things we need from cross-Government co-ordination is for British citizens who fought for Daesh to be prosecuted for genocide and war crimes. Surely that must change.

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. As he knows, they are guilty of a crime—what they have done in going to fight overseas is a crime—and they should be brought to justice. What we have done overall is to call for the evidence that we need to prosecute them to be gathered by the special investigative team that has just been set up by the UN, thanks to the UK's agency.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend notice Tony Blair's remarks over the weekend in the Middle East? He brings great learning to this subject. In the end, there might be the prospect of Hamas being brought in—of course that must be right—but before that can happen it has to renounce terror, to recognise Israel's right to exist, to cease and desist from vile and anti-Semitic propaganda and to abide by the Quartet principles. Nevertheless, what he says has a profound truth; if only Hamas would listen to it and act on what he says.

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question; he brings great learning to this subject. In the end, there might be the prospect of Hamas being brought in—of course that must be right—but before that can happen it has to renounce terror, to recognise Israel's right to exist, to cease and desist from vile and anti-Semitic propaganda and to abide by the Quartet principles. Nevertheless, what he says has a profound truth; if only Hamas would listen to it and act on what he says.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support British overseas territories and other countries recently affected by severe hurricanes in the Caribbean.

Boris Johnson: I am obliged and I stand corrected, Mr Speaker. I am answering Questions 8, 10 and 14 together, because they all relate to the impact of the hurricane. The House can be proud of the way the country responded. We have committed £62 million to meet the immediate—[Interruption.] Excuse me, Mr Speaker; I am answering Questions 10 and 15 together with Question 8—

Mr Speaker: Or even Questions 10 and 14. I realise that these are not the sort of matters with which the right hon. Gentleman ordinarily has to preoccupy himself. They may seem a mere trifle, but they are quite important in parliamentary terms.

Boris Johnson: I am obliged and I stand corrected, Mr Speaker. I am answering Questions 8, 10 and 14 together, because they all relate to the impact of the hurricane. The House can be proud of the way in which the country responded. We have provided £62 million to meet the immediate humanitarian needs. We deployed 2,000 military personnel and delivered 600 tonnes of aid. We fielded fantastic quantities of calls, not least from colleagues, some of whom I see are present behind me. I am chairing an inter-ministerial group to support a long-term recovery plan to get those overseas territories and British citizens back on their feet.

Chris Davies: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the swift UK response was unreasonably criticised by some? We should recognise the efforts of our outstanding aid workers and our military.

Boris Johnson: I am grateful for the sentiment that my hon. Friend expressed and his willingness to come to the defence and support of our military and our aid workers. I saw from my own direct experience that they did an absolutely fantastic job. I will not hide it from the House: I was surprised to see on the news—before the hurricane had even finished—that I had received a letter denouncing the UK's performance and...
our response from the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I thought that was hasty, and I hope to be able to explain to him when I appear before his Committee, as I shall shortly, that I thought it was a premature judgment.

Nigel Huddleston: Can the Foreign Secretary say what assessment has been made of the effectiveness of our help so far in getting the islands up and running again and open for business?

Boris Johnson: I really must advise my hon. Friend that the extent of the damage is so considerable that he must see it for himself. It is quite extraordinary. Hon. Members should understand that the British Virgin Islands and Anguilla have seen nothing like this for generations, and it will take time, but we are committed and we will be there for the long term.

Toby Perkins: The Foreign Secretary is right to pay tribute to the British armed forces for the part they played in the overseas territories, but it is also right to recognise that the contribution that the British Government made both immediately and in the days after Hurricane Irma was considerably less than that of their counterparts in Holland and France in their overseas territories. It is absolutely crucial that, going forward, the investment that the islands need means that those people no longer look with envy to their French and Dutch counterparts.

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is completely in error when he says that. In point of fact, both the French and the Dutch appealed to us at various times for help with their own needs, and, of course, we were very glad to supply that. We are now working with them and the Americans to make sure that we have a joined-up plan to react in the event of any future hurricanes.

Boris Johnson: If I may humbly correct the hon. Lady, there has been no loss of EU funding so far. As she will understand, EU funding will continue for some years—let me put it like that. [Interruption.] In the meantime, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has made it clear that, one way or the other, we will get through the very considerable sums that are needed—whether it is through the Caribbean Community or the Caribbean Development Bank. The assessments of the requirements are only now coming in. We must wait to see exactly what the bill and the requirements are before we start pushing out the money. When we have a full understanding of the requirements, we will ensure that the UK stands behind the plan.

Rohingya People


12. Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): What recent representations he has made to his Myanmar counterpart on the treatment of the Rohingya people.

The Foreign Secretary spoke to Aung San Suu Kyi on 7 and 17 September. I met her in Naypyidaw in Burma on 27 September, and the Deputy Foreign Minister at the UN General Assembly on 20 September. We called for an end to the violence in Rakhine state, a safe return for refugees, full humanitarian access, and, most importantly, implementation in full of the Annan Commission’s recommendations.

Gerald Jones: We are seeing the heartbreaking pictures and hearing the tragic stories of the plight of the Rohingya people on a daily basis now. Will the Minister increase his representations? Specifically in the light of the evidence of the atrocities by the Myanmar armed forces, does he feel that the decision to lift the EU sanctions against the military regime was premature?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful question. What is going on in Rakhine is a human tragedy and a humanitarian catastrophe. When the UN lifted sanctions in 2011, it was trying to encourage a road towards democracy, which has obviously happened with the election that took place only 18 months ago. With hindsight, one might argue that these sanctions were lifted prematurely. However, a lot of Burma watchers would say that the sanctions did not have a huge effect. There was not a great deal of money from the Burmese military in western bank accounts in the way that applies, for example, to sanctions for Russia, China and elsewhere.

Mr Shuker: The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights described what is happening in Myanmar as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. I happen to agree with him. Does the Minister?

Mark Field: As I said, it is a humanitarian catastrophe out there. Sadly, this increasingly appears to be an accurate description of the situation. It is now essential
for the Burmese authorities to enact the positive measures that were announced by the State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, on Thursday evening. They include the establishment of a new civilian-led body to oversee refugee returns and the development of Rakhine into a state in which all communities can live together sustainably.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Terrible acts of brutality and violence have been carried out against the Rohingya people. Is it the Minister’s intention to ensure that the Burmese army will be charged with war crimes for what they have done?

**Mark Field:*** That is a matter for the UN. The issue of genocide is a legal one and it will be determined at UN level. I understand that there is some frustration and a perception that diplomatic advancement has been slow. We have taken a lead in this. There have been two closed meetings and an open meeting of the UN Security Council. The truth is that a headlong rush to get a Security Council resolution along these sorts of lines would most likely end up being vetoed by the Chinese or the Russians. We need to move together as an international community, recognising that these serious crimes must be properly dealt with.

**Catalonia**

11. **Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC):** What representations he has received on the state in which all communities can live together sustainably.

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** I discussed Catalonia with the Spanish ambassador to the UK on 11 October. Our embassy in Madrid regularly discusses the issue with the Spanish Government. We also routinely engage with the Catalan regional Government on matters that fall properly within their competence.

**Jonathan Edwards:** The referendum provided a clear mandate for independence with over 92% of voters voting yes, despite horrific violence by the Spanish authorities. Yesterday pro-independence leaders were detained and charged with sedition. Surely the British Government and the international community should now be guided by the words of Woodrow Wilson:

“Self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of actions”.

We should support the values of peace and democracy, not the forces of oppression.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** It is the rule of law that needs to govern the decision affecting the future of Catalonia. We fully defend the rule of law and actively assert that this can take place only within the proper workings of the Spanish constitution.

**Malaysia: General Election**

13. **Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op):** If he will encourage his counterpart in Malaysia to welcome Commonwealth observers at the forthcoming general election in that country.

**The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):** We encourage all countries, including Malaysia, to conduct open and transparent election processes. Naturally that should include external observation missions, which I believe—and I am sure the hon. Gentleman believes—are important to achieving a legitimate democratic outcome.

**Mr Leslie:** I welcome the Minister’s statement. Election observers can help to check that electoral registration in constituencies and districts, campaign finance and polling day are all above board. Will the Minister do what he can to help our friends in Malaysia show the entire world that these elections can be free and fair?

**Mark Field:** I very much hope so. As the hon. Gentleman points out, Malaysia is an important partner for the United Kingdom, with co-operation across a range of areas, including security, prosperity, education, foreign policy and Islamic finance. He will be glad to know that I have a routine meeting—tomorrow morning, no less—at the Foreign Office with the high commissioner to Malaysia, and I will ensure that his heartfelt views are put forward.

**Daesh**

15. **Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con):** What diplomatic steps his Department is taking to assist the international campaign to bring Daesh to justice.

**The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt):** I was proud, on 21 September this year, to speak at the United Nations Security Council when it unanimously adopted a UK-drafted resolution, which involved the deployment of an investigative team to Iraq to help bring Daesh perpetrators to justice. The United Kingdom is giving material and moral support to this work.

**Ross Thomson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm what discussions he has had with key partners in the region with regard to the reconstruction and stabilisation of the area for the long term in a post-Daesh world?

**Alistair Burt:** Absolutely. I have been to the region twice in recent months to speak to Iraqi authorities about what is happening to make sure that areas formerly occupied by Daesh are given support. We strongly support the work being carried out on behalf of the UK Government through the Department for International Development to make sure there is stabilisation. We recognise not only that these areas need physical reconstruction but that the political reconciliation that brings different sides together to work in effective local governance is a key part of the solution for the future.

**John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op):** The UK is leading the global coalition’s efforts to disrupt and counter Daesh’s communications. Can the Minister broadly say what we are now doing differently, as a result of our learning against this fast-moving and fluid organisation, from what we were doing a couple of years ago?

**Alistair Burt:** It is a good question. There is a certain amount that can be said and cannot be said. We are all aware that Daesh operates in an increasingly...
The UK takes certain steps to deal with this, in company with partners, through cyber-protection and the like. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that as Daesh’s attempts to infiltrate the minds of people have stepped up, so have our attempts to counter that.

CHOGM

16. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What plans he has to engage with parliamentarians before the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in the UK in April 2018.

[901187]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): We are, of course, supporting the UK Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s plans to hold a detailed forum for Commonwealth parliamentarians in February 2018, before CHOGM. As my hon. Friend will know, we intend to have a range of contemporary issues discussed, including security, prosperity, climate change and all aspects of human rights, ahead of the national debates that will take place at the Commonwealth summit in April 2018.

James Duddridge: I thank the Minister for that reply, specifically because it advertises an event this afternoon offering colleagues the opportunity to find out more about the forum. What specific opportunities will there be for parliamentarians at CHOGM and in the two years after CHOGM, when the UK is in the chair?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend, a former Minister, makes a valid point. There is no point having large-scale meetings such as CHOGM if we see them as an end in themselves. We need to have plans for the future, and I think those plans are afoot. Let us be honest: there has never been a more important time for us to be networked in, whether with the Commonwealth or a range of other international institutions, on all the issues—particularly around security and prosperity—that should be close to the hearts of all British parliamentarians.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The nation of Sudan may have expressed its interest in joining the Commonwealth, but will the Minister make it clear that, despite Donald Trump’s recent lifting of sanctions on Sudan—a decision welcomed by this House in March, the Foreign Secretary told this House that it is now pretty clear that America supports it.”—[Official Report, 28 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 116.]

Does the Foreign Secretary think that those comments perhaps demonstrate that he has a lack of political judgment?

Mark Field: I very much understand the shadow Minister’s concern. My hon. Friend the Minister for Africa made it clear in meeting Sudanese people only yesterday that we are pushing for further reforms. As she rightly says, it would be very premature at this juncture for there to be any application to join the Commonwealth, and it would obviously be a matter for other Commonwealth members to approve.

It is also important to point out that the Commonwealth, as a body, is much respected, particularly in Africa. One looks at countries such as Rwanda and Mozambique, which were never part of the British empire, but which have joined the Commonwealth. That is a big sign of approval for it, but obviously these things need to be done in a properly concerted manner.

Topical Questions

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The whole House will wish to join me in condemning the atrocity in Mogadishu on Saturday, which claimed at least 281 lives. Those who inflicted this heinous act of terrorism on a thriving capital city achieved nothing except to demonstrate their own wickedness. We offer our profound condolences to the Government and people of Somalia. Britain shall not rest in our efforts to restore stability in a country that has suffered for too long.

Jeff Smith: I agree with the Foreign Secretary’s comments on the terrible events in Somalia.

In March, the Foreign Secretary told this House that the Labour party had been “far too pessimistic” about Donald Trump. He said specifically that the nuclear deal with Iran “was going to be junked”, but “it is now pretty clear that America supports it.”—[Official Report, 28 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 116.]

Does the Foreign Secretary think that those comments perhaps demonstrate that he has a lack of political judgment?

Boris Johnson: If I may say so, perhaps the hon. Gentleman’s question demonstrates that he has a lack of understanding of what has taken place, because, as he will readily appreciate, the United States has not abrogated, or “junked”, the joint comprehensive plan of action. The JCPOA remains alive; it remains intact. It is our intention in this Government, working with our French and German friends, and with China and Russia, as well as with the rest of the European Union, to keep that deal alive, because that is in the interests of the whole world.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Even if the Americans have 100% reliable intelligence to find every single nuclear site and rocket launcher in North Korea, the regime has thousands of guns mounted in caves near the border ready to bomb Seoul. In these circumstances, will the Foreign Secretary encourage the Trump Administration to pursue diplomacy in Korea, as in Iran? To coin a nostrum, “Jaw-jaw is better than war-war.”

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is completely right. The best way forward is to continue with what I think is the common policy on both sides of the House, which is to encourage the Chinese to intensify the economic pressure on Pyongyang with a view to getting it round the table, and that is what we are doing.
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): At our last session of questions, the Foreign Secretary agreed with the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) that if the EU demanded a single penny in the Brexit divorce bill, then they could “go whistle”. A month later, the Foreign Secretary said—

[Interruption. I appreciate that accountability is difficult for the right hon. Gentleman, but he ought to listen. He said:

“We are law-abiding, bill-paying people” who will

“meet our legal obligations as we understand them”,

so can he clear up this issue today? Does he accept that there will be a divorce bill or not, and if so, how much should the bill be?

Boris Johnson: I must very humbly and apologetically correct the right hon. Lady, because she is not faithfully representing what I said. [Hon. Members: “She is.”] She is not. What I said in answer to an hon. Member on these Benches was that some of the sums I had heard spoken of were, in my view, or in the view of my hon. Friends, eye-watering and far too high. The figure I heard was £100 billion. Would Labour Members cough up £100 billion? Would you, or you, or you? I think they would, the supine, protoplasmic, invertebrate jellies. I think that is the sort of money they would readily fork out. I think it is too much.

Mr Speaker: I hope the Hansard reporters caught the full flavour of that. We will inspect the Official Report tomorrow.

Emily Thornberry: I do not think that has really cleared up a great deal, but let me try another question.

Again at our last session, the Foreign Secretary told this House—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I cannot believe that the Foreign Secretary conducted himself in that way when he was a schoolboy. Or perhaps he did, which might explain some matters.

Emily Thornberry: Let me just quote again from the last session of Foreign Office questions, when the Foreign Secretary told the House:

“There is no plan for no deal”.—[Official Report, 11 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 141.]

Five days ago, he said that

“we must make the right preparations...for a no-deal scenario.”

We know that the Cabinet cannot stop fighting about the Brexit that they want, but it would be a start if our flip-flopping Foreign Secretary could stop fighting with himself.

Boris Johnson rose—

Emily Thornberry: I have not asked the question yet, Boris. Which is it: the Telegraph article or the Florence speech—the lion roars or the lion wants to stop this vulgar.

Boris Johnson: I would not dream of calling the right hon. Lady by any name other than Lady Nugee. May I say to her that, in fact, there is a ruthless and an iron consistency that applies not just to everything I have said, but to all the statements made by Conservative Members? We are united behind the principles of the Lancaster House speech, the article 50 letter and every jot, tittle, comma, syllable and every other item of punctuation in the Florence speech. I suggest that she adopts it as well.

T8. [901169] Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend review the case of my constituent Jamie Harron, who was arrested in Dubai recently? Will he review the Foreign Office travel advice for Dubai in the light of this case and others like it?

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): May I begin by expressing our condolences to Mr Harron, who has been through a very difficult situation? We are grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this specific case. Consular staff have spoken to Mr Harron’s family, we have dealt with Mr Harron himself, we have provided consular access for friends to visit him and we have provided access to the best legal advice. He is currently on bail, awaiting sentence for an alcohol-related offence. The point about the travel advice is one that we take very seriously, and we continue to review it on a regular basis.

T2. [901162] Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Members of the Coptic Church come from all over south Wales to Risca, to worship at St Mary’s and St Abu Saifain. The congregation have looked on in horror at the terrorist attacks on fellow Copts in Egypt. Just this weekend, an archbishop was assassinated outside Cairo by an Islamic extremist group. What assurance can the Minister give the congregation at St Mary’s and St Abu Saifain that the Government are doing everything they can to protect brethren who are simply following their religion?

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I thank the hon. Gentleman. We are united behind the principles of the Coptic Church just last week with the support of His Grace Bishop Angaelos, and I am going to the Coptic service later today to express further solidarity. We raise these matters directly with the Egyptian Government, who view these terrorist attacks with the same degree of horror as we do, and who are doing all in their power to stop them. We will continue to urge just that.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Will the Foreign Secretary join me in thanking Ambassador Frank Baker for all his tireless work in Iraq? He has worked with the Foreign Secretary, Secretary Tillerson and the Iraqi Prime Minister to put together a deal that would have avoided the catastrophic situation that now plagues the country between the Kurds and Baghdad. Will the Foreign Secretary urge all sides to come back together around the negotiating table on that framework and negotiate a deal?
Boris Johnson: I want to thank my hon. Friend very much for his work in this sphere. There is no one who knows the Kurdistan Regional Government or Kurdistan better than he does. Clearly, to a great extent the troubles that are now befalling that area were anticipated. We saw this coming, and we warned our friends in Kurdistan that it would happen. My hon. Friend also did a great job of warning them. We now have to manage a very difficult situation, and it calls for calm heads and negotiation.

T3. Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the Foreign Secretary respond to claims by a senior German politician, Michael Fuchs, that the Foreign Secretary is a significant factor in holding back progress in Brexit talks? Does he believe that his recent interventions on Brexit help or hinder these negotiations?

Boris Johnson: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a moment ago. The Government are united on a very coherent policy, and we made a very generous offer. If I may say to the gentleman that he quotes, whose name I did not, alas, catch, it is up to our friends and partners in the EU to look seriously at the offer we are making, particularly on citizens, and to make progress. Everybody wants to make progress, and everybody wants to give the 3.2 million EU citizens in this country the maximum possible reassurance and security. That can only happen once our friends and partners decide to get serious in these negotiations.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I thank the Foreign Secretary, notwithstanding our differences, for his personal intervention in the case of a constituent of mine who, along with her 22-month-old son, was rescued from Dominica by our Government—I am very proud of that—and brought back to this country safely? Unfortunately, she is not entitled to any benefits for three months, and she is relying on the generosity of the great people of Broxtowe. In the circumstances, will my right hon. Friend at least look at the bill for her flight home and consider waiving it?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who I know has campaigned assiduously for the rights of this particular constituent, and I congratulate her on everything she has done. Unfortunately, that kind of agreement would set all sorts of precedents, but we will look at the particular case and we will certainly see whether we can come up with a payment plan to extend the period of the loan.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

T4. Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): We should all be very worried about the malevolent involvement of the Iranian hard-line al-Quds force using American heavy weapons against our brave allies the Kurds. Will the Minister make it clear that Iraqi forces must not enter the four provinces of the Kurdistan region, and that the only way forward is co-operation in Kirkuk and wider dialogue based on the Iraqi federal constitution, which is supposed to guarantee Kurdish rights?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I spoke this morning to the Foreign Minister of Iraq, and I am speaking later to representatives of the Kurdish Regional Government to do exactly what is being expressed in the House—to urge caution on all sides, and to continue a careful dialogue to make sure that there is no possibility of a miscalculation leading to conflict. It is essential that matters are pursued on a constitutional basis, but there is a difficulty at the moment in getting accurate information about precisely what is happening in the region. We are doing all we can to verify all stories, but we are also doing all we can to cool down the situation.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): This Government have promised protection to an area of ocean equal in size to India, covering Pitcairn, St Helena and much more. I think it is a source of huge pride for our country, but we are not all the way there yet, so I hope the Minister can provide an update on progress, specifically in relation to Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha, both of which have been promised protection—in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am very happy to update my hon. Friend in due course on the exact details of those two, but I think we can all bask in the reflected historic glory, as it were, of having pretty much the largest ocean protection area in the world, apart from the United States, which made ours one of the most effective voices at the oceans summit in Washington last year.

T6. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My constituent Mrs Edna Dolor is very relieved that her frail elderly parents in Dominica—poisoned by contaminated water, beyond the reach of aid, denied telephone contact—are today boarding the first of the four planes it will take to get them back to the UK. She makes the point that because news about aid drops can be spread only by word of mouth, people such as her parents have not had access to the aid. The Foreign Secretary has talked about a long-term plan. How long does he think it will take to get Dominica back on its feet?

Boris Johnson: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the failure of communications has greatly exacerbated the difficulties. One of the things we have been trying to do is to restore mobile communications as fast as possible. We are putting in a £5 million aid package to Dominica through the Department for International Development, and the Prime Minister of Dominica, Roosevelt Skerrit, has written to our Prime Minister to express his profound gratitude for the Government’s response.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I strongly welcome the Foreign Secretary’s earlier remarks about Hamas, but does he share my deep concern about the groups linked to Islamic State that now have a presence in Gaza and Sinai and that, even in recent days, have been firing rockets into southern Israel?

Alistair Burt: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Absolutely—rooting out those terrorist organisations in Gaza and Sinai is hugely important, not only for those who live in the immediate target area but for wider regional peace. There can be no peace without a rejection of violence, particularly rocket attacks in relation to Israel, but there are indications that something is going on that may help the process of peace in the area.
Mr Speaker: I know that we are out of time, but that does not trouble me too much. There are many colleagues whom I wish to call on these very important matters, so brevity is required. I call Dr Philippa Whitford; very briefly—well done.

Alistair Burt: The short answer is no, as the Foreign Secretary indicated earlier, until there is movement on the Quartet principles. However, resolution to improve the humanitarian situation is appallingly needed, and we are doing all that we can to support that.

Fiona Bruce (Con): Do Ministers share concern about the apparent continuing erosion of the one country, two systems principle in Hong Kong following the disappearances of booksellers, the recent imprisonment of a democratically elected representative and, last week, the refusal of entry into Hong Kong on a purely private visit by UK citizen and human rights campaigner Ben Rogers, who is watching our proceedings today? If so, what action is the Foreign Office taking?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank my hon. Friend for her question. It is fair to say that broadly UK-Hong Kong relations remain strong, and there is bilateral work. However, I very much accept her position. We are very concerned that Ben Rogers, a UK national, was denied entry into Hong Kong on 11 October in absolute disregard of the one country, two systems principle. The Foreign Secretary has issued a statement, and the Foreign Office director-general for economic and global issues summoned the Chinese ambassador on this issue over the past few days. We have also made representations to Beijing, and I shall write to Carrie Lam in Hong Kong in the days ahead.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister of State for what he said, and the Foreign Secretary for issuing that statement. Ben Rogers is an outstanding and articulate champion of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Asia and elsewhere, well known to Members on both sides of the House. His treatment was utterly scandalous, and those responsible have certainly not heard the last of it—of that we can be sure. I call Paula Sherriff.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. What is the UK Government’s position on the recognition of Palestine? Did the Minister see the recent YouGov poll, commissioned by the Council for Arab-British Understanding and Arab News, that showed a majority of respondents in favour, with only 14% in opposition?

Alistair Burt: The UK Government position is that Palestine will be recognised when it is in the best interests of the peace process to do so, which leaves the matter quite open.

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues who have already spoken are greedily indicating a desire to contribute again. I am keen to accommodate colleagues, but there is a limit.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Reports from Cameroon describe barbaric clashes between security forces and civilian opposition. The internet and phone lines have been cut, and constituents of mine with family members in the country are rightly concerned about their welfare. What can my hon. Friend do to help stop the worsening crisis and help people find out about their family members?

Rory Stewart: Clearly, the situation in Cameroon is very disturbing. As my right hon. Friend suggests, the Anglophone community has been particularly victimised in terms of internet access, which has now been restored. We call on all parties to refrain from violence and to respect the rule of law, and call particularly on the Government of Cameroon to exercise restraint and respect the rule of law, and call particularly on the Government of Cameroon to exercise restraint and address the root causes of the dispute.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Secretary of State may be aware of the tragic and unexplained death of my constituent Kirsty Maxwell, who died in Benidorm in April this year. Her family are distraught, as the
investigation’s progress has been very slow and there are a number of issues. Will the Secretary of State meet me and Kirsty’s family to discuss what further support can be given at this very difficult time?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady in the first instance to discuss this; we would like to extend all the consular assistance we possibly can to anyone in such circumstances.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Given the grave situation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, what does my right hon. Friend think will be the impact on our currently deployed British Army teams who are training the peshmerga as we speak?

Alistair Burt: At present, I do not think there is any reason to change the arrangements of the armed forces who have worked with the peshmerga and have done such an outstanding job to push back Daesh. What we are all hoping for is that there will be no conflict in the area and that the determination already expressed by both sides to prevent any conflict will lead to a peaceful resolution of the current difficulties.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): As Amnesty International among others has pointed out, the disproportionate use of force by police against civilians is contrary to international law. What representations has the Minister made to his Spanish counterparts about the treatment by Spanish police of civilians voting in the Catalan independence referendum?

Sir Alan Duncan: People understand that we do not wish to see scenes such as that, but it is the duty of everyone in this House personally to uphold the rule of law. I very much regret that Scottish National party Members considered it appropriate to call themselves “official” observers at what was an illegal referendum.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Yesterday’s red skies were a timely reminder of the Russian revolution 100 years ago, which brought such chaos and suffering. In the light of indications that Russia seeks to destabilise western democracies, does the Secretary of State share my concern that Russia’s state broadcaster appeared to be providing a platform to Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party and its campaign to inflict socialism on the UK?

Mr Speaker: Order. This tendency to name people is very unseemly. I said earlier that it was vulgar. If it was vulgar from the illustrious figure of the shadow Foreign Secretary, it is also vulgar from the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). The tendency must cease.

Boris Johnson: I am very grateful for my hon. Friend’s excellent question. If we study the output of Russia Today and consider the state of the press in Russia at present, we see that it is a scandal that Labour Members should be continuing to validate and legitimate that kind of propaganda by going on those programmes. [Interruption.] I am assured by my ministerial team that none of them does so.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the questions about Kashmir, we are talking about two states with nuclear arms possibly edging towards a conflict, and we should all take that seriously. Given our unique historical relationship with both countries, cannot pressure be brought to bring the two sides together to engage in some sort of meaningful dialogue?

Mark Field: It is the 14th minute of injury time already—unlucky for some, I think. I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answers on this issue. We understand that clearly there is a worry: as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, both India and Pakistan are nuclear states and the world can ill afford this flashpoint. From my own discussions in India and Afghanistan—I am going to Pakistan next month, as I said—there seems to be a lessening of some of the tensions. We can take nothing for granted, but ultimately this must be an issue for India and Pakistan rather than anyone else.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister that we are in injury time, and that is at least in part because questions and answers at Foreign Office questions are always longer. As a Clerk of the House once said to me, “Mr Speaker, I think that Ministers tend to feel that they’re addressing not merely the House but the world.”

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I warmly thank the Foreign Secretary for suggesting that he and I should visit the BBC Monitoring Service at Caversham Park before the crazy decision is implemented next year to sell off the site and break our link with the similar American operation there. Will he remonstrate with his officials, however, on the grounds that 45 minutes for a walk-through on a Thursday is not long enough for him to see what is going on there? Given also—[Interruption.]—that the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee cannot accompany us, should the visit not be altered?

Mr Speaker: Emotional intelligence has a premium.

Boris Johnson: I am looking forward immensely to the trip with my right hon. Friend, and I can tell him from my own experience that an immense amount can be accomplished in 45 minutes.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that it was former Governor of New York Mario Cuomo who said we should campaign in poetry but govern in prose? The next time we hear the Foreign Secretary quoting Kipling, will he be campaigning or governing?

Boris Johnson: The SNP contrives to govern neither in poetry nor in prose. It should begin governing to start with.

Mr Speaker: Finally and—he has promised—briefly, I call Sir Hugo Swire.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): What are the chances of getting the Chennai Six home by Christmas?

Rory Stewart: rose—
Mark Field: Much as I would like my hon. Friend to take over this particular matter, I will answer.

I know that this case, which my right hon. Friend raises with me whenever I see him on the parliamentary estate, is very close to his heart. I raised it this month during my visit to India and spent a day in Chennai, when I had a chance to visit the men in prison. It was heart breaking, but the determination of those men and their families is to be much admired. I also saw the families in my office at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I should take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend and other MPs across the House who represent the Chennai Six. I know that a huge amount of work has been done. I cannot make any promises, and I do not want to raise expectations that we cannot meet, but we are doing our level best here and in India to bring them back as soon as possible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I believe that the point of order springs directly out of questions, and for that reason I will take it now—otherwise it would come after statements—but it must be done briefly.

Joanna Cherry: I seek an apology from the Minister for Europe and the Americas, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who is no longer in his seat. The SNP did not send official observers to the Catalanian referendum. The Catalanian Government invited observers from across Europe and the Israeli Knesset. In addition to me, other Members of the House and a peer of the House of Lords, Lord Rennard, were present. We were there as international parliamentary observers, just as Conservative Members were in Gibraltar in 2002 at the request of the Gibraltar Government, despite that being an illegal referendum. I would like an apology and the record set straight.

Mr Speaker: I have understood the hon. and learned Lady, but we do not need to delve into the archives and refer back to 2002 and comparable examples. I recognise it is something that a distinguished legal practitioner is accustomed to doing, but we are short of time. If Ministers want to apologise, they can, but they are not under any obligation to do so.

Boris Johnson indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that the Foreign Secretary is shaking his head. It is clear that he does not wish to apologise. The hon. and learned Lady has made her point with force and eloquence, however, and it is on the record; it will be in the Official Report. If that does not satisfy her, I hope it at least mollifies her.
International Investment

12.49 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The United Kingdom has a deserved reputation as one of the most open economies in the world, one that welcomes international investment and the benefits it brings. Our position as the fifth-largest economy in the world has been built on international trade and investment. Today’s Green Paper affirms our commitment to that approach, and sets out proposed reforms of our scrutiny of foreign investment to ensure that our national security is protected.

An open approach to international investment must include appropriate safeguards. It is vital that the UK Government can deliver on their primary duty to safeguard national security and ensure that the interests of the British people are protected, and it is important for the Government to have both knowledge of potential national security risks to the UK and the ability to act where necessary. Our review has highlighted the need for that to be updated to take account of the changing structure and size of companies in sectors that are critical to our national security. Our reforms will bring the UK in line with many major developed economies. We want to develop clear, consistent and proportionate rules which will enable us to scrutinise the ownership of our infrastructure, but which will also be well understood and will give international investors the clarity and transparency that they require.

We are proposing a two-stage approach. First, I am updating our current arrangements by consulting on amendments to the Enterprise Act 2002 to enable the Government, if necessary, to intervene in mergers that fall outside the current provisions. In most sectors, the thresholds in the Act allow the Government to intervene in mergers on public interest grounds only if the acquired company has a UK turnover of more than £70 million, or if the share of supply is 25% or more of the market. The thresholds are no longer appropriate for certain sectors, particularly those in which smaller companies may hold technologies that are critical to national security. For those sectors, we are proposing to introduce amendments through secondary legislation that would lower the turnover threshold to £1 million and remove the requirement for the merger to increase the share of supply to 25% or more.

Specifically, I am consulting on amendments to the thresholds for the dual use and military sector, and certain parts of the advanced technology sectors. The first relates to items that are currently subject to export controls. Hostile actors should not be able to acquire such items, or knowledge about how to make them, by buying UK-based businesses. The second relates to companies that are involved in the design of computer chips and quantum technology. Advanced technologies can create threats that are difficult to detect, and may mean that devices could be directed remotely should a hostile actor gain access.

The Green Paper also seeks public views about options for wider reforms to the way in which we scrutinise investment for national security purposes. In particular, we are seeking views on two proposals: broadening the range of transactions that the Government are able to review for national security purposes, and the introduction of mandatory notification of foreign investment in certain parts of the economy that are critical for national security, such as the civil nuclear and defence sectors. The Government intend any reforms to be firmly targeted at national security. While the national security assessment must, by its very nature, remain confidential, we will also seek to provide greater certainty and clarity for businesses in respect of the process itself. Our proposals will ensure that our arrangements for protecting national security are aligned with the practices in other major countries, and are more robust in response to the evolving nature of national security threats and technological change.

Let me say something about takeovers more generally, outside the area of national security. We have held discussions with stakeholders, including the Takeover Panel, about the current process. Those discussions have covered the need for more information and time to allow for the assessment of takeover bids by interested parties, and to enable assurances given during the takeover process to be properly assessed and compliance-scrutinised.

We believe that the changes recently proposed by the Takeover Panel would improve the UK’s takeover rules, and we look forward to their conclusion by the end of the consultation.

The Government will also act, when appropriate, to ensure that public funds are protected in mergers. In particular, we will take steps to ensure that Government-funded research and development grants can be clawed back following a takeover if the new company would have been ineligible to receive the grant, or if the purpose for which the grant was made has changed.

Let me now turn to an international investment announcement that was made late last night. On Tuesday, I briefed the House on the trade dispute brought by Boeing against Bombardier. My colleagues and I have been constantly engaged from the outset, and have considered all the alternatives that we can bring to bear to resolve the dispute. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that yesterday the boards of Bombardier and Airbus announced plans for a joint venture involving the C series aircraft. The deal is expected to be completed by the second half of next year. I have spoken directly to the chairman of Bombardier and the chief executive of Airbus about the joint venture specifically, and I have also discussed the matter with Chrystia Freeland, Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. My top priority has been to emphasise the importance of giving certainty to Bombardier’s high-quality UK workforce, now and in the future.

As the House well knows, the Shorts factory in Belfast employs more than 4,200 highly skilled workers and supports a supply chain of hundreds of companies and many more jobs across the United Kingdom. Airbus also has a large presence in the UK, employing more than 15,000 people, and is firmly rooted in the UK’s advanced-technology industrial base. It is in all our interests for the C series to be successful. Both Bombardier and Airbus have made a number of important commitments to me, including commitments that C series wing manufacturing will continue in Belfast, and that the strategy will be one of building on existing strengths and commitments.

This announcement offers the potential to protect the interests of Bombardier’s Belfast workers and the UK supply chain. The UK is already Airbus’s wing factory for the world, and the announcement reinforces that position. The trade dispute brought by Boeing against
Bombardier’s C series remains in place. We consider Boeing’s action to be totally unjustified, unwarranted and incompatible with the conduct that we would expect of a company that has a long-term business relationship with the United Kingdom. We reject entirely any suggestion that our support for Shorts contravenes international rules. We will continue to work to see the dispute resolved while Bombardier and Airbus complete their merger.

I remain in close contact with Airbus, Bombardier, and the Canadian and US Governments. I will be speaking to the chairman of Bombardier and the chief executive of Airbus again later this week for an update on progress. I will, of course, continue to meet the representatives, and to meet Members of Parliament with constituency interests, who have been assiduous in standing up for their constituents. I will do everything I can to secure, at all times, the best possible future for Bombardier’s Belfast workforce and its UK-based suppliers.

I commend my statement to the House.

12.56 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The news that Bombardier and Airbus will be forming a partnership will be welcome to the thousands of Airbus and Bombardier staff who are employed in the United Kingdom, but can the Secretary of State confirm that he has received unequivocal assurances from Airbus and Bombardier about the security of UK jobs in the long term? The pairing of two cutting-edge product lines is very exciting for the future of aerospace manufacturing, but it should not be an excuse for the Government to diminish their efforts to ensure that the unfair tariffs imposed in the United States are dropped. Will the Secretary of State give more details about the further action that he proposes to take? For example, has he written to the European Commission?

Britain clearly wants to be open to investment, despite reports that the Office for National Statistics is revising its investment position downwards. However, it would be naïve to allow key businesses to be at risk from people who have no interest in the long-term success of a business, its workers and its pensioners, or in the long-term interests of the British economy.

Today’s proposals are welcome, but I have some concerns. First, I am concerned about the delay in the presenting of the proposals. In the last year or so, we have seen mergers that have called into question the purchase of Opel and Vauxhall raised concerns about jobs and investment. Yet again, our takeover regime was unable to guarantee that those things would be protected, and this week we have heard about the risk of voluntary redundancies. My first question to the Secretary of State is this: why did it take so long, given the manifest deficiencies in the regime to which we drew his attention earlier this year?

My second concern relates to the inadequacy of the proposals. They seem to lower the threshold tests that must take place before the competition authorities and the Government can scrutinise a merger. However, those lower tests apply only to the dual-use and military sector, and to companies that are involved in the design of computer chips and quantum technology. But there are other high-technology sectors that are also in need of the same protections, including life sciences, and food, chemical and automobile manufacturing, to name but a few on a very long list of sectors and business areas that are systematically important to UK plc. These powers would have given no assurances to companies like Unilever, for example, who might try to resist a takeover and have been calling for better safeguards in the takeover regime overall.

Similarly, it is not clear how these powers would have helped in many of the cases I have mentioned where they potentially do apply. Indeed, this morning when the Secretary of State was asked whether these powers would have altered the takeover of ARM, he stated that the turnover of that firm already qualified for scrutiny so this would have made no difference.

So, finally, does the Secretary of State agree that his proposals, while welcome, on the thresholds in particular, fail to protect companies that still fall within them, and will he confirm what further action he proposes to take, because action is desperately needed?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her recognition—which I hope and think is shared across the House and certainly in Northern Ireland—that this is a very positive step forward. I have been very clear that we will continue to seek to strike out and resolve the trade dispute that has been brought by Boeing. Given what we have been doing during the weeks since the initial complaint was made, I do not think anyone could accuse the Government of being anything other than full-hearted in our attempts to resolve this, and our efforts, with our Canadian Government counterparts, to find a secure source of guarantees for Belfast have been widely welcomed this morning.

In terms of the assurances given, Bombardier and Airbus have clearly said they regard the Belfast wing operation as foundational. They expect to expand the production, which means good prospects for those jobs in Northern Ireland and the supply chain across the United Kingdom. That is extremely good news. We will continue to pursue to the point of resolution the trade dispute. The hon. Lady asked about the European Commissioner: my right hon. Friend the International Trade Secretary has discussed this personally with the European Commissioner for Trade. We will leave no stone unturned in seeking a resolution of this dispute.

On the proposals in the Green Paper on international investment, I would have thought the hon. Lady should welcome the fact that we continue to be the third-biggest destination in the world for overseas investment. One of the major strengths of our economy is that we have a
reputation for dependability and openness, and it is important that we preserve that while upgrading our systems of scrutiny to make sure that the national interest is protected, particularly in the case of national security. In saying that, I note that the hon. Lady suggests that there has been some delay in so doing, but the changes we are making were changes that were not made during 13 years when the Labour party had the chance to address these matters. I hope she will respond to the consultation and welcome it.

It is right that the threshold should be dropped in order to admit small companies: everyone knows that as technology develops, smaller companies can have a critical role to play in producing products that are part of a wider system. It is right to have that degree of scrutiny. But when the hon. Lady reads the advance copy of his statement, she will see that, in addition to those initial changes, we are consulting on whether there should be a wider set of powers to require the mandatory notification of mergers in other sectors of the economy, and we make some proposals around that. It is right to consult on that, but it would not be right for every single transaction in the economy to be required to go through an administrative process when it does not pose a threat to our national interest. That is the purpose of the consultation, and I hope she will welcome it.

The hon. Lady raises the question of Unilever. One of the features of the proposed takeover of Unilever was that the company—correctly, in my view—did not feel it had the time to prepare a proper defence of itself, given the current takeover rules. Following conversations that we have had, the Takeover Panel is proposing a more substantial period in which, at the request of the target company, it will have longer to prepare that defence. That will be welcomed across the economy. This is a consultation by the Takeover Panel so we will wait for that to conclude, but I have welcomed it as a positive step forward.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the record levels of inward investment demonstrate a strong vote of confidence in Britain, showing that we are open for business and an outward-looking and world-leading nation?

Greg Clark: I agree: it is a proud boast that we are the No. 3 nation in the world. We are by no means the biggest nation in the world, but to be No. 3 behind the US and China in terms of foreign direct investment is a real vote of confidence in this economy, and that is something I and my team and my colleagues across Government will always work hard to extend.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for an advance copy of his statement.

The Scottish National party supports measures that best protect our citizens and measures that relate to national security. However, it is not clear why these proposals have been brought forward now, so can the right hon. Gentleman tell us why now, and what the UK Government’s long-term strategy is?

We also believe it is vital that Parliament is fully involved in this process. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that that is the case?

Finally, on military technology, the UK Government must look to their own track record. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the same degree of stringent oversight and scrutiny is to be applied to arms sales abroad?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions, although I am surprised that he did not want to welcome the investment decision in Bombardier. In response to his—perfectly reasonable—question, “Why now?”, it is right to upgrade our systems for scrutiny periodically. A national security risk assessment was carried out recently, which correctly pointed out that smaller companies have the potential to pose a threat to national security, and these measures respond to that. We are publishing a Green Paper; Parliament is being invited to scrutinise it, as the essence of a Green Paper is that it is published for Parliament, as well as people in the outside world, to examine. On military technology and the scrutiny of arms sales, I think the hon. Gentleman should know that that is already subject to a licensing procedure.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm to the House that robust due diligence is always carried out on foreign investment when it might afford other Governments control of systems that are closely linked to national security, such as the grid?

Greg Clark: That is the essence of the proposals, and it is necessary to update them from time to time in line with the recommendations that arose from the national security risk assessment. It is very important—it is the first duty of Government—to make sure that we are protected from hostile threats.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State’s recognition of the need to widen the public interest test, but express some disappointment that his definition of it does not appear to include cases where British companies that are fundamental to the science base would be at risk of acquisition, as in the abortive Pfizer AstraZeneca bid, and more recently in the successful bid for ARM, Aveco and the many smaller companies now being acquired on the back of a cheap pound.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He will be aware that under European law we are limited in the public interest test to questions of national security, financial stability and media plurality. That is the situation that exists, hence the proposals that we have are around strengthening national security. I ask the right hon. Gentleman to study the Takeover Panel proposals to give a longer period for the scrutiny of any bids in the public domain, allowing the target company to respond, because from what I have seen so far, that has received a very positive response in corporate Britain, and when that consultation concludes I very much hope it will be enacted.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): There are occupants of the Treasury Bench to whom I once taught economics, and I used to tell them that the United Kingdom owned more assets overseas per capita than any other nation on earth. Do we still believe in the free movement of capital?
Greg Clark: We certainly do, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has been part of the process of educating generations of Conservative Front Benchers. In fact, the UK’s stock of overseas investment is second only to that of the United States of America. For this country to be second only to the United States in terms of the value of the assets that we own overseas is a remarkable achievement, and he is right to pay tribute to that.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I sincerely thank the Secretary of State and the Energy Minister, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), for their steadfast support for Bombardier and Belfast. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that, in encouraging a union between Bombardier and Airbus, Boeing has scored a spectacular own goal? Will he continue his commitment to supporting that partnership, both in terms of the tariff proposition from the US International Trade Commission and of the regulatory considerations to come?

Greg Clark: I will indeed, and I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is the constituency Member for the Bombardier Shorts plant in Belfast. No part of the United Kingdom could have a more vigorous representative of the interests of its constituents than his constituency. He and his colleagues have played an important role in this process. The reaction of Boeing is clearly a matter for that company, but I have been clear that as long as that unjustified and unmerited complaint is being pursued, we will vigorously defend it. We think that the complaint is without merit. As I said when I last updated the House, it is in everyone’s interest that the complaint should be withdrawn so that the relationship that Boeing seeks to have with this country should not be marred by the unjustified action that it is taking. My hon. Friend has my commitment on this.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome the Government’s attention to this area. I note that research and development in areas of critical national security often occur in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. Has my right hon. Friend given any thought to how these proposals might impact on the propensity of people to invest in that sector?

Greg Clark: It is important that investors, especially those starting up a firm for the first time, should reflect on the fact that the UK is the best place in the world to establish new scientific and technological companies. They can invest with confidence. The ability to scrutinise investments should not put anyone off establishing a firm in this country. It is often possible to deal with security concerns through conditions and undertakings, and getting that framework clear and in place will give confidence to investors in the future.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I welcome the Bombardier announcement—it is very good news. However, future Airbus investment in the UK will depend on a Brexit deal that allows the company to operate as it does now. The company has been very clear about that, and it will mean having a deal rather than no deal. For example, if a wing leaves Broughton but then needs further work, British Airbus employees can leap on to a plane and follow it. They might be away for days or even weeks. Will that be able to continue post Brexit?

Greg Clark: My colleagues and I meet regularly not only with Airbus but with the whole of the aerospace industry, which is one of our most successful industries, and we are well aware of how the sector and the companies within it work. This informs our negotiations to allow us to ensure that that way of working can continue.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and the investment in Bombardier. As the fourth industrial revolution accelerates and new technologies emerge, will he consider introducing a call-in mechanism to allow flexibility when the Government scrutinise transactions for national security concerns?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is a great champion of the need to prepare for the fourth industrial revolution, if we are to benefit from it. Part of the reason for this Green Paper is consistent with the high standards that we have always had in this country for ensuring that our systems are up to date. We are suggesting that, in certain sectors that are relevant to national security, it would be possible, subject to the results of the consultation, to scrutinise transactions to assess whether they posed a problem.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is surely right to add smaller companies to the national security process, but this is only a Green Paper and secondary legislation takes time. Given how fast these fields of technology are moving, what are the Government doing right now to mitigate the risk of what we want to legislate to deal with in the future?

Greg Clark: The proposals can be introduced through secondary legislation, and I hope that they will find favour with the House so that we can proceed with that. There is an ability to act through other measures if there is a threat to national security, but the essence of these proposals is that this can be done in anticipation, rather than when a threat has crystallised. This is the right way to proceed, rather than waiting for a threat to be identified as imminent. This is about being prepared.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and particularly the news about Bombardier. Does he agree that the Brexit vote was about us going out into the world and being part of the international trading community, not about withdrawing behind a wall? Will he therefore reassure me that, despite what we are saying about considerations of national security, we will remain an open advocate of free trade in the world?

Greg Clark: It is precisely because we are a leading advocate of free trade and open investment that it is necessary to have the right framework in place so that people can invest with confidence. In fact, in many cases, the steps that we are taking bring us into line with our competitor nations when it comes to trade, and I am absolutely confident that this regime will be respected and applied.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On the subject of companies developing dual-use technology, can the Secretary of State confirm that as well as introducing powers to stop those companies falling into
foreign hands, he will ensure that they will still be able to recruit workers from the EU? Those workers will often not be particularly well paid, as they might be graduates working in start-up companies. Also, will he clamp down on companies here that use subsidiaries in other countries to avoid UK export controls and sell dual-use technology that can be used to clamp down on dissent in middle east countries?

**Greg Clark:** On the right hon. Gentleman’s second point, an export control regime deals with these matters. On his first point, while the scope of the Green Paper is extensive, it is not a consultation on immigration policy. There will be other opportunities to pursue that.

**Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): I broadly welcome the proposals to change the takeover code and protect national security assets, especially smaller companies, but will the Secretary of State consider adopting a new principle that for every new policy that could be construed—however unfairly—as being protectionist or anti-business, at least two new policies should be brought forward that state as loudly as possible that Britain is open for business and a free trading country committed to free enterprise?

**Greg Clark:** We are saying loudly and clearly that we depend on free trade, and that free trade depends on our having clarity in the rules so that investors in our companies know what scrutiny they will be subject to. That is something that business has wanted, so it is good that we are going to be clear about that.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): These proposals are welcome as far as they go, but if, thinking about the bigger picture, we are looking at transparency in safeguards relating to foreign investment, we will need to stamp out the laundromat money-laundering schemes that channel billions of pounds through the UK. What steps are the Government taking to eliminate the vehicles for that practice, including the Scottish limited partnerships?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friends in the Treasury are, as the House knows, active and vigorous in pursuing measures against money laundering, and that approach is an important part of this regime’s reputation for applying high standards.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and his recognition of the importance of not only large strategic businesses, but the supply chain. Does he agree that it is vital that the rules for the scrutiny of foreign investment are clear, certain and proportionate?

**Greg Clark:** That is exactly what is proposed in the Green Paper. The focus is on national security, which is an important responsibility for the Government. It is important that investors and businesses know the procedures so that they can have the greatest certainty when conducting business, including when contemplating takeovers.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about the role of industrial strategy in helping to harness international investment?

**Greg Clark:** One of the strengths of the UK’s economy is our reputation for innovation and discovery through the application of science. Our industrial strategy deepens our commitment to that. We have seen the biggest increase in public investment in research and development for more than 40 years. Part of our strategic approach means establishing companies that make use of that technology, and having a regime under which companies that do use that technology can be confident about taking in foreign investment is part and parcel of the positive, mature regime that we want to establish.
EU Exit Negotiations

1.21 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the fifth round of negotiations with the European Union. In view of the fact that the October European Council is this week, I will also review the progress of the five negotiation rounds since June.

While the negotiations have been tough at times, both Michel Barnier and I have acknowledged the new dynamic created by the Prime Minister’s speech in Florence. That momentum was maintained during October, and both negotiating teams have continued to work constructively together. Since June, we have steadily developed our shared political objectives. Nevertheless, there is still some way to go to secure our new partnership, but I am confident that we are on the right path.

I will now take the House through each of the negotiating issues in turn. On citizens’ rights, we have made further progress towards giving British citizens in the EU, and EU27 citizens in the UK, the greatest possible legal certainty about the future. Our legal orders will be distinct and different in the future. Last week, we explored how we will ensure that the rights we agree now will be enforced in a fair and equivalent way. We also explored ways in which we can fully implement the withdrawal treaty into UK law, giving confidence to European citizens living in the UK that they will be able to directly enforce their rights, as set out in the agreement, in UK courts.

The two sides also discussed ways of ensuring the consistent interpretation of our agreement. Although we have not yet arrived at single model to achieve that, we have explored a number of options. We should also not lose sight of the fact that we have made significant progress in that area since June. We have reached agreement on the criteria for residence rights, the right to work and to own a business, social security rights, rights for current family members, reciprocal healthcare rights, the rights of frontier workers, and the fact that the process for securing settled status in the UK will be streamlined and low cost. However, there are of course still some issues outstanding for both sides, including the rights: to continue to enjoy the recognition of professional qualifications; to vote in local elections; to onward movement as a UK citizen already resident in the EU27 and to return; to bring in future family members; and to export a range of benefits. In many of those areas, it is a straightforward statement of fact that our proposals go further and provide more certainty than those of the Commission, but both sides are trying to find pragmatic solutions. In the fourth round, we offered the guaranteed right of return for settled citizens in the UK in exchange for onward movement rights for British citizens currently living in the EU. We look forward to hearing the Commission’s response to that offer.

I recognise that there has been some concern regarding the new system that European citizens will have to use to gain settled status in the UK. While there will be a registration process, I confirmed last week that the administration process will be completely new, streamlined and, importantly, low cost. Furthermore, any EU citizen in the UK already in possession of a permanent residence card will be able to exchange it for settled status in a simple way and will not need to go through the full application process again. The tests associated with the process will be agreed and set out in the withdrawal agreement. As a result of our productive discussions, the Commission is also able to offer in return similar guarantees to British citizens in the EU. Those clarifications from both sides have helped to build further confidence.

This round also saw further detailed discussions on Northern Ireland and Ireland. In a significant step forward, we have developed joint principles on the continuation of the common travel area and associated rights. The joint principles will fully preserve the rights of UK and Irish nationals to live, work and study across these islands. They will also protect the associated rights to public services and social security. To provide legal certainty, the principles recognise that the withdrawal agreement should formally acknowledge that the UK and Ireland will continue to be able to uphold and develop bilateral arrangements.

Our teams have also mapped out areas of co-operation that function on a north-south basis, and we have started the detailed work to ensure that that continues once the UK has left the EU. We also agreed a set of critical guiding principles to protect the Belfast or Good Friday agreement in all its dimensions, and we are working on the necessary steps to make that a reality. Throughout the process, we have reaffirmed our commitment to the rights of the people of Northern Ireland to choose to be British or Irish, or both. I have set out before our shared determination to tackle the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland by focusing on creative solutions, and we have begun to do so. But we cannot fully resolve the issues without also addressing our future relationship. As the Prime Minister said in her statement to the House last week: “We owe it to the people of Northern Ireland—and indeed to everyone on the island of Ireland—to get this right.”—[Official Report, 9 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 43.]

On the financial settlement, discussions continued in the spirit fostered by the Prime Minister’s significant statements in her Florence speech. The Prime Minister reassured our European partners that they will not need to pay more or receive less over the remainder of the current budget plan as a result of our decision to leave. She reiterated that the UK will honour the commitments we have made during the period of our membership. Off the back of that, we agreed in the September round to undertake a rigorous examination of the technical detail on which we needed to reach a shared view. That work has continued. It has not been a process of agreeing specific commitments—we have been clear that that can only happen later—but it is an important step, so that we will be able to reach a political agreement when the time comes.

Finally, on separation issues, we have continued to work through the detail on a range of issues, particularly areas relating purely to our withdrawal, such as nuclear safeguards, civil judicial co-operation, and privileges and immunities. While we have made good progress, the remaining issues are dependent on discussions about our future partnership. We are ready and well prepared to start those discussions.

Our aim remains to provide as much certainty as possible to businesses and citizens on both sides. I have made no secret of the fact that to fully provide that
certainty we must be able to talk about the future. We all must recognise that we are reaching the limits of what we can achieve without considering our future relationship. The Prime Minister’s speech in Florence set out the scale of our ambition for the new partnership with the European Union. She also laid out our case for a simple, clear and time-limited period of implementation on current terms. At the European Council later this week, I hope the leaders of the EU27 will recognise the progress made and provide Michel Barnier with the mandate to build on the momentum and spirit of co-operation we now have. Doing so will be the best way of allowing us to achieve our joint objectives and move towards a deal that works for both the UK and the EU.

There has been much discussion of what will constitute sufficient progress. Let me be clear that sufficient progress, and the sequencing of negotiations, has always been a construct of the EU, not the UK. Negotiations require both parties not just to engage constructively, but to develop their positions in advance. For the UK’s part, I have always been clear that we will be conducting these negotiations in a constructive and responsible way. We have been entirely reasonable. The work of our teams and the substantial progress that we have made over recent months proves that we are doing just that, and we are ready to move these negotiations on. I commend this statement to the House.

1.29 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

No one should underestimate the seriousness of the situation in which we find ourselves. At the first hurdle, the Government have failed to hit a very important target, which leaves EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in Europe in a continued state of uncertainty. There is insufficient progress on Northern Ireland, and it appears that the deadlock on the financial settlement is such that both sides are barely talking.

The Secretary of State says he is confident that we are now on the right track. I cannot fault him for his confidence in his own negotiating ambitions. The problem is that most of those ambitions have failed to materialise. One ambition was that the sequencing of talks would be the row of the summer and that he would not agree, but he agreed by coffee time on day one. His suggestion that sequencing and the concept of sufficient progress are EU constructs leaves out the fact that he agreed to them and signed up.

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State were right to go to Brussels last night. Obviously, I would like to claim that was in response to the letter I wrote to the Secretary of State last Thursday, but even I recognise that would probably be over-claiming for my letter. Because of the seriousness of the situation, both sides—I include the EU—need to do whatever they can to break the impasse by Friday. More flexibility is needed on both sides by Friday.

I hear what the Secretary of State says about the Florence speech, which was an important speech, but he would be on stronger ground if what the Prime Minister said in Florence had not been immediately undermined by the self-interested antics of some Cabinet members. I also hear what the Secretary of State says about the statement of intent last night to accelerate the process. Given the glacial speed so far, it is not exactly a high ambition—a car going from 2 miles per hour to 4 miles per hour is accelerating, but it is still going slowly.

If we want investment in our economy to continue, and if we want businesses to stay here and others to come, we need to start talking about transitional arrangements now. Those transitional arrangements need to be on the same basic terms as now—in the single market and within a customs union. Every passing week without progress on transitional arrangements makes things worse for businesses, not better. We need to make progress this week, before December.

We also need to drop the nonsense about no deal. Only fantasists and fanatics talk up no deal. No deal is not good for the UK, is not good for the EU and is not what the Secretary of State wants, but he must now realise that the slow progress of these talks raises the risk of no deal.

We need the Secretary of State to answer these critical questions from the Dispatch Box today. What does he intend to do between now and Friday to deliver on the commitment to accelerate the talks? What words does he want to hear on Friday to evidence that progress? How confident is he, on a scale of one to 10, that he will hear those words? And what does he intend to do if he fails?

Mr Davis: As ever, we get carping from the right hon. and learned Gentleman and not a single proposal or suggestion. It is interesting that he does not have another strategy, and we have a measure of that because he started by criticising the fact that citizens’ rights have not been resolved, whereas on Sunday he said, “I agree with David Davis, who says you cannot simply separate out the issues we are dealing with now and the later issues.” He talks about Northern Ireland in the same terms: “To be fair to David Davis, he is right on issues like Northern Ireland. There is only so far you can get before we move to the next phase.” When he has to appear reasonable on Peston he is very different from when he has to appeal to his Buck Benchers here.

The simple truth is that there has been extremely productive activity in these negotiating rounds. Mr Barnier is going to the European Council on Friday to present his case, which I hope will argue for more progress both on transition and on the future relationship, but it is for him to make that persuasive case on the day. I know from my own visits across Europe, and Mr Barnier will also know this, that a large number of the 27 member states want to do the same.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about talking up no deal. I cannot think of a time, a day, a moment when I have talked up no deal. We are in the middle of a negotiation, and we want to negotiate in good order and with good faith on both sides, but if we do not prepare for all outcomes, we will leave ourselves exposed to an impossible negotiation. We saw that again this weekend when he and the shadow Chancellor said, “Oh, we’ll pay in perpetuity for access to the single market. We’ll pay whatever it takes. £100 billion. £200 billion. Whatever it takes.”

The simple truth of the matter is that the right hon. and learned Gentleman carps and carps, but he has no options of his own.
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend has said that in the discussions we have also explored ways in which we can fully implement the withdrawal treaty in UK law. Does that suggest he has in mind legislative enactment of the withdrawal treaty? When he talks about the role of the UK courts, does he mean that the enactment will be overseen by our courts, and not by the European Court of Justice?

Mr Davis: A range of models are available for how we bring the withdrawal treaty into British law—British law, not European law—and the key criterion I am applying is that it gives certainty to those EU27 citizens who are here now that their rights will be preserved. It will, of course, be adjudicated by British courts.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the Scottish National party spokesman, I remind the House that Members who arrived in the Chamber after the statement started should not be standing. Some experienced Members are standing when they should not. I am afraid it is too bad if they got their timing wrong. Members should keep an eye on the annunciators and get into the Chamber in time for the statement. It is a considerable discourtesy to turn up late, not having heard some of the statement, and then expect to be called, so please do not.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I said that Members who arrived late should not be standing. The message is clear, and it ought to be heeded. It is discourteous to ignore it. End of subject.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

About a year ago, the Prime Minister said that we cannot expect a running commentary, but in truth we would not have to run very fast to keep up with the negotiations. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has already commented in similar terms to the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg, but he might have added that, before pressing the accelerator, we should check whether we are heading towards or away from a cliff edge.

We have seen one humiliation after another for this Government. They tried to drive a wedge between the Commission and the 27 sovereign states from which it takes its mandate and authority, so will the Secretary of State assure us that the Government will stop playing these games and accept the Commission’s mandate, rather than attempting to undermine it and thereby undermine their own position? He claims that the UK is being reasonable, but is it reasonable to go in with red lines already firmly dug into the sand before the negotiations have even started? That does not look too reasonable to me.

The Secretary of State assures us that he has never talked up no deal, but he has not talked it down, either. Other influential voices in his party talk up no deal all the time. The Prime Minister still has not withdrawn her claim that no deal is better than a bad deal. Rather than just not talking up no deal, will the Secretary of State absolutely rule out no deal today as the worst of all possible deals?

Finally, on the rights of EU nationals living here, I had a distressing meeting last week with representatives of the Fife Migrants Forum. They told me of their first-hand experience of immensely talented, hard-working young people who have made Fife their home but who are now making plans to head back to Poland, Slovakia or wherever else, not because they do not like living in Scotland but because they do not think the United Kingdom will make them welcome. Will the Secretary of State commit to guaranteeing in law the rights of those citizens, rather than continuing to use them as negotiating capital?

Mr Davis: There were three questions there, which I will take in sequence. First, on separating the 27, nothing could be further from the truth; the worst thing for the UK would be for us to have to deal with fragmentary groups of the European Union, as we would never get an answer and that would lead us to the Walloon Parliament outcome on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Canadian treaty, so we have not done that at all. However, we should also talk to each of the 27 to see what their own interests are, as those of Poland and Lithuania may differ from those of littoral states such as Holland or Belgium, and differ again from those of Spain and Italy. We talk to all of them on a continuous basis to make sure we know what they want.

To pick up the hon. Gentleman’s last point, about his Polish constituents, let me say that we also go to those Governments to explain precisely what we have on offer. There have been times in the past few months when the European institutions have not reflected what we intended to do. For example, in a perfectly legitimate and reasonable mistake, Guy Verhofstadt said that we were not going to give European citizens the right to vote in local elections. That was not true, so we corrected it directly with the Governments.

As for no deal, the issue is straightforward: we are intending, setting out and straining every sinew to get a deal. That will be the best outcome, but for two reasons we need to prepare for all the other alternatives. The first is that it is a negotiation with many people and it could go wrong, so we have to be ready for that. The second is that in a negotiation you always have to have the right to walk away: if you do not, you get a terrible deal.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Today, a report estimated that should we move to a tariff regime, the German motor car industry alone could lose between 8,600 and 29,400 jobs. It is massively in the interests of the UK and our 27 partners that we establish reciprocal free trade based on a recognition of conformity of standards. In his conclusion, the Secretary of State says that he recognises that we have reached the limits of what we can achieve without consideration of our future relationship. When are our partners going to recognise that it is massively in their interests that we establish reciprocal free trade and start talking about our end trading relationship?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. Of course it is absolutely in everybody’s interest that we have an outcome that encourages free trade in all directions, across the EU and with us. The simple truth is that we are in a negotiation and they are using time pressure to
see whether they can get more money out of us—that is what is going on, as is obvious to anybody. That will take some time, but I am sure we will get there in time to get a decent outcome for everybody.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): As evidence mounts that leaving the EU with no deal would involve an unacceptably high price, it is also clear that although the Prime Minister’s speech in Florence improved the atmosphere, it has not broken the logjam in the negotiations. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what the Government now propose to do or to offer so that the talks can move on to phase 2 and in particular to the nature of the transitional arrangements, for which British businesses are waiting because they urgently need to know that those arrangements will happen and what their terms may be?

Mr Davis: First, I say to the right hon. Gentleman that he should not jump to conclusions, as we have yet to hear the Council conclusions on Friday. Let us wait to see what they are before we make the next move; if I do, I probably will not make it from the Dispatch Box—I will probably make it in Brussels. On the implementation period, transition period or whatever he wants to call it, the Prime Minister has made it clear from this Dispatch Box that things will be as close as possible to where we currently are for up to or about two years. That was what her estimate was and I have no reason to differ from it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I mentioned the poor timekeeping of several colleagues, and I stand by that, but I wrongly accused the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) of being late for this statement and he quite properly corrected me. He was in fact here and I had not been conscious of it, so my apologies to him and let us hear his question.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. What expectation does my right hon. Friend have that on Friday a decision will be made that sufficient progress has been made on the people issues of the island of Ireland, which would very much be welcomed, but that, given that any decision on goods and services across what we hope will continue to be a soft border cannot be made without second-guessing any future UK-EU relationship, this should be carried over into the next phase?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right to say it is difficult to come up with a solution to create an invisible border if we do not know what the border around the rest of the United Kingdom will be. I think that, over time, the European Union has come to a similar view, although it may never have said so explicitly. I do not want to predict what the conclusions will say when they come out on Friday, but I suspect they will pay proper attention to the fact that we have made quite a lot of progress on Northern Ireland, possibly as much as we can.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I have sympathy with the Secretary of State because he has to come here every month to report on negotiations that resemble the holding pattern at Heathrow airport, where the planes go round and round but never actually move forward. May I return him to this crucial issue of no deal? Members of his party have spent the past two or three days touring TV studios saying that they are relaxed about that outcome, yet the Resolution Foundation and the International Trade Policy Observatory have today published a report saying that it would mean added costs for families of between £250 and £500 per year, with the burden falling most heavily on families in the Midlands and the north. Is he relaxed about that kind of additional burden on hard-working families?

Mr Davis: If I thought it reflected the reality, I would not be relaxed about it, but the simple truth is that it does not. It does not reflect the effect of free trade and the free trade deals, and it does not reflect what we would have to do in those circumstances. [Interruption] The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), from a sedentary position—he has not been here very long and obviously thinks this is the way to do it—shouts that I am talking up no deal. No, I am not. I am dealing with scaremongering and I am knocking down scaremongering, so I think the answer there is no.

Anna Soubry (Bromley and South ton) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement and the advance in the negotiations made by both him and the Prime Minister? Does he agree that it is not just within this House where there is no majority for no deal, but that by their vote on 8 June the British people did not give this Government any mandate for no deal, because not only would it be bad for everybody in England, Wales and Scotland, but it would be particularly bad for our friends in Northern Ireland?

Mr Davis: I would say two things to my right hon. Friend. First, the election gave us a bigger mandate than it gave the Opposition. Secondly, we are seeking to get a deal, as that is by far and away the best option. The maintenance of the option of no deal is both for negotiating reasons and for sensible security; any Government doing their job properly will do that.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If there is no deal, agricultural products from Wales will probably face tariffs in Europe, and European agricultural goods coming into the UK will face tariffs. That will dramatically increase the cost of family food budgets, which is wrong and bad for my constituents. The Secretary of State for Transport has a brilliant answer to this; he says that we are just going to grow more food. In order to grow more food in this country, will we not need agricultural workers from elsewhere in Europe and the common agricultural policy to remain? Might we not just be better off staying in the EU?

Mr Davis: I am very fond of the hon. Gentleman, but if he wants to look at the pricing of food, he should look at how much of it is down to the common external tariff barrier on food.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Those who threaten economic Armageddon if we leave the EU without a deal are, in effect, engaging in “Project Fear 2”. Does my right hon. Friend agree that “Project Fear 1” did not materialise and there is every possibility that “Project Fear 2” will not either?
Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right about that. I am not a great believer in mathematical forecasting, but I can tell him that if he really wants to look at an independent view of what a World Trade Organisation outcome would look like, he could look at an OECD report out today, which says that growth will continue.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State must be gutted that after not one, two, three or four, but five rounds of negotiation we still have not even a sign of this potential for a transitional arrangement, which is so essential for businesses. They are not necessarily thinking of the cliff edge in March 2019; that cliff edge is beginning at the end of this calendar year, when businesses are starting to look at relocating to other jurisdictions. Will he therefore tell us specifically, because this week’s European Council is mission critical, who he will be talking to between now and Friday to make sure we get that transition done this week?

Mr Davis: We are in a negotiation. As the hon. Gentleman quite rightly points out, we have been talking for five rounds so far, and indeed I had another meeting with Mr Juncker and Mr Barnier last night. Let us just see what the European Council comes out with on Friday, shall we?

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Secretary of State said in his statement that “we cannot fully resolve the issues without also addressing our future relationship.” He is obviously right in saying that, but is it not also the case that it is impossible to address the future relationship if talks do not take place? Will he therefore resist the siren voices who are tempting him to say that if there is no progress this week, we should get up and walk away? If we get up and walk away, we will never solve the issues that he talked about in his statement.

Mr Davis: There are no plans to get up and walk away.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): With it looking increasingly likely that the Prime Minister’s claim that no deal is better than a bad deal might be put to the test, and with new research out today—not only the report mentioned by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) but the OECD report—indicating that that would result in a horrendous economic situation, will the Secretary of State assure the House of Commons that it will have a meaningful opportunity to vote on what would be a disastrous outcome of the current gridlocked negotiations? That vote is going to be crucial because this is not what the referendum was about.

Mr Davis: During the passage of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017, the Government gave an undertaking that there will be a vote on the deal.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Mr Juncker used the uncharacteristic analogy of ordering 28 beers; does my right hon. Friend agree that our moving into the second phase of negotiation on our future trading arrangements would be a welcome sign of a “Sober October” in which minds are clear and focused on what is in the best interests of both the UK and the EU?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend puts it better than I can.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State set out the implications of the Prime Minister’s Florence speech for the UK’s relationship with EU regulatory bodies such as the European Medicines Agency during transition? Will we in effect seek to remain a member of such organisations, despite our having formally left the EU?

Mr Davis: As the Prime Minister said in her Florence speech, we start by identifying the regulatory position, and the question is then how we manage divergence. Britain will bring the control of such matters back within its own shores, and we will then have a procedure between us by which we manage divergence.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on the patience and good humour with which he conducts the negotiations. At what time does he think he will be obliged to inform the EU that that patience is not infinite and that if it continues to refuse to discuss the future relationship, which is after all prescribed by article 50 and which is something we want to do, we will assume that it is not serious about doing so and therefore consider other options?

Mr Davis: I think I learned patience and good humour from standing at the Dispatch Box and dealing with that lot on the Opposition Benches. The simple answer to my right hon. Friend is that I expect the EU to do what is in its own best interests. That is what normally happens in a negotiation and that is what will happen in this one. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) stated earlier, there are massive interests for the EU in getting a deal, and that is what will happen.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I particularly welcome the references to Northern Ireland and the related progress that has been made. Sadly, thus far, too much of the focus by too many has been on the obstacles to be overcome in relation to the Irish border. Does the Secretary of State agree that the best approach is to get the best possible trading relationship with the Republic of Ireland, ergo minimising any obstacles to be overcome? Does he commit to keep emphasising that point to the Taoiseach, speaking for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on these matters?

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady is entirely right. It is important to the Republic of Ireland not only because it intends to maintain the peace process and an invisible border, but because the direct interests of the Republic of Ireland are in maintaining a very good trading relationship with the UK. I think the trade between us is worth around £1 billion a week, so the Republic of Ireland would not want to see that handicapped.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will initiate the implementation phase only if our final relationship with our European allies has been agreed, at least in principle, so that what is meant to be a transitory state of affairs does not become a permanent bridge to nowhere?
Mr Davis: There are two answers to my hon. Friend. First, we will try to get the nature of the implementation phase agreed as soon as possible so that, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, businesses can take it into account. Secondly, my hon. Friend is right that such a transition phase will be triggered only once we have completed the deal itself. We cannot carry on negotiating through it, because our negotiating position during a transition phase would not be very strong.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State claimed that progress has been made on the questions of EU citizens here and British citizens living in other EU countries. Will he confirm that British citizens living in other EU countries will maintain the protections of the European Court of Justice for the foreseeable future, whether or not we are inside the EU?

Mr Davis: I am not sure that I heard the hon. Gentleman correctly. Did he ask about EU citizens here or UK citizens there?

Mike Gapes: UK citizens there.

Mr Davis: Yes, UK citizens in the EU will of course maintain the protection of the ECJ, because by being inside the EU they will be within the ECJ’s remit.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Is it sensible to allow the EU to focus on the nature of an implementation phase before we are clear about what the final relationship is? Would not it be a good idea at this point to have Crawford Falconer, who is very experienced in trade negotiations, involved in the negotiations with the EU in a principal position?

Mr Davis: Mr Falconer works at the Department for International Trade, of course, but we are in constant communication with him. With respect to the sequencing of decisions on the implementation phase and the ongoing relationship, my hon. Friend is correct in theory, but in practice we need the implementation phase to be decided early for it to be beneficial to a large number of companies. In his response to the statement, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) pointed out that some companies will have to make decisions at the end of this year or in the first quarter of next year so that they are able to carry out any necessary changes, so we want to get things under way as quickly as possible.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), some representatives from the pharmaceutical industry came to see me last Thursday, and they are desperate for some clarification on future trading relations and regulation. If they do not get some certainty, investment is going to be put back or spent in other countries. Nobody thinks that we should give the EU a blank cheque, but can the Secretary of State not see that if arguing about every £5 billion takes so long that we lose more in GDP, it is not worth it?

Mr Davis: First, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), had a meeting with the industry this morning, and not for the first time. I have met industry representatives a couple of times as well. Secondly, part of the point of the implementation phase is that it gives them an extra two years of decision making, and that is well within their decision cycle. Thirdly, as for giving a blank cheque, that is Labour’s policy.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I very much welcome the update that my right hon. Friend has given the House. As we leave the EU, the talented people and their businesses will drive our economy forward, whatever the outcome of the deal, because that is what we do in British business. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is now time for the EU to move on with trade discussions and that British businesses that operate throughout Europe should be lobbying the Commission and the member states in which they operate so that the EU moves forward and we can start to see some clarity and certainty?

Mr Davis: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and, indeed, a number of British businesses are doing just that.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As I have told the House before, my wife is an EU citizen, and I can assure the Secretary of State that his comments today will not give her any more comfort about her settled status in the future. What EU citizens want are guarantees. On the process to which he has alluded, what does a streamlined system look like? What does low cost mean, because I am sure that his definition is different from that of my constituents? How many additional resources will be employed by the Home Office to put that system in operation?

Mr Davis: The Home Office is already working on that and we will be publishing a White Paper in due course and bringing a Bill to that effect before the House.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): The decision to leave the EU in its entirety has been made, and any other consequence will be a betrayal of that vote. Is it not right and logical that a no-deal option has to be on the table in the event that we are forced, through bad negotiation and lack of will on the other side, to stay in an organisation that we voted to leave?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend’s point is entirely logical.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The writing is on the wall and the warning signs are there for the economy, whether on growth, foreign direct investment, and the decisions that businesses are already taking in anticipation of there being no deal or no agreement on transition as soon as business needs it. Despite that, the Chancellor has been savaged not by the Opposition but by members of his own party for no reason other than drawing to the attention of this House and the public the risks associated with making a series of bad judgments, or indeed no judgments at all, about our future relationship with the European Union. Given that many firms, including manufacturing firms with supply chains in the EU, will be making irreversible decisions before Christmas about jobs and activity, what assurance can the Secretary of State give them this afternoon that there will be a transitional deal before manufacturing and every other sector are faced with a series of unpalatable decisions?
Mr Davis: One thing that I will say to the hon. Gentleman about his fantasy economics—I can put it no better than that—is that people like him have been talking down the economy for two years. They said that there would be recession in the economy immediately following a Brexit decision, but the reverse has been true: we have higher employment than we have ever had; lower levels of unemployment than we have had for 30 or 40 years; and the economy is growing as fast as it has done.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assist me? Not to countenance a no-deal scenario would surely be writing a blank cheque to the European Union. Is it, in his view, naivety in negotiating strategy or is it in fact a vehicle for those who wish us to stay within the European Union against the wishes of the British people?

Mr Davis: It is a good question, but it is not really for me; it is a question for those on the Labour Front Bench. My hon. Friend is quite right that it does not hold up as a negotiating strategy.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The core cities represent nearly 20 million people in the UK and a significant sector of our economy. Michel Barnier is meeting them soon. Why, despite repeated requests, has the Secretary of State not met them?

Mr Davis: I have been meeting mayors of the major cities at my behest and not at anybody else’s, starting with the Mayors of London, Liverpool, Manchester and Teesside and others will follow.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD) rose—

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: On this occasion, it is youth before seniority.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State has said in his statement that we have made further progress on certainties for EU citizens in this country. May I tell him what creates great uncertainty for people? Those EU nationals who have lived here for many years and now want to apply for British passports are being delayed because they have to apply for settled status first. Can he explain why those citizens cannot apply for British citizenship straight away, rather than being delayed, which causes yet more uncertainty?

Mr Davis: I must say, with respect to the hon. Lady, that that is news to me. If she sends the individual case to me, I will take it up with the Home Office for her.

Tom Brake: This is something that the Minister’s office will not have to leak to Guido Fawkes. Does the Secretary of State accept that some of the consequences of crashing out of the EU will be: destabilising the lives of millions of EU citizens in the UK and of UK citizens in the EU; gridlock at our ports; and a loss of investor confidence in sectors as varied as the creative industries, the automotive sector and the food and drink sector? Will he rule out once and for all the so-called no-deal option, even if it does appeal to some of the fanatics on his Back Benches, and work instead towards a solution that keeps the United Kingdom in the single market and the customs union permanently?

Mr Davis: The first thing that I point to is the right hon. Gentleman’s wonderful selective choice of fantasies—none of them is true. He has ignored the fact that inward investment in the UK was at record levels in the first half of this year. As he raises the point about how a letter of his came to the attention of Guido Fawkes—he did it in a point of order yesterday and has alluded to it again today—let me tell him that that letter came to me via a journalist who already had full knowledge of its entire contents. I am afraid that he has no apologies coming from me on that either.

Mr Speaker: That discussion can continue on a subsequent occasion.
Points of Order

2.5 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In health oral questions on 16 October, the Health Secretary answered questions on the mental health workforce. It was clear that two of his answers were not correct. He stated twice that the mental health workforce had increased by 30,000 staff, but, as I understand it, the correct figure is about 690. There has been an attempt today to correct the record, but it is still not correct. Although the questions were about mental health staff, the corrections are about the total numbers of NHS clinical staff. May I ask through you, Mr Speaker, that the Health Secretary makes a further correction to give the House the correct figures for mental health staff?

Mr Speaker: I have heard what the hon. Lady has said. It is up to any Member who errs to take responsibility for the correction of the record. It cannot be ultimately for the Chair to seek to arbitrate where there might be a dispute as to which is the correct statistic in a particular case. The hon. Lady, who is extremely experienced and dextrous in the use of parliamentary devices to achieve her objective, should keep a beady eye on the situation and if there is neither a correction forthcoming nor what she regards as an adequate or fully accurate correction, she can, through the Table Office, table further questions, which might elicit the same. On the whole, it is presumably desirable to reach a conclusion on these matters sooner rather than later. If that point is obvious to the hon. Lady, I trust that it will be similarly obvious to the Minister concerned.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I seek your advice on a matter relating to the A63 road in my constituency, known locally as Castle Street? It is a major route into the city and many of my constituents are worried about the lack of clarity on this issue. On 17 July, I wrote to the Transport Secretary to invite him to meet me. It has taken two-and-a-half months for his Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State to write to inform me that the Department does not propose to meet me at this point. This is a massive discourtesy and a huge insult to my constituency and neighbouring constituencies, which have seen repeated delays to the Castle Street development. I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, about how I can encourage the Secretary of State to meet me on this incredibly important issue to my local economy.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady has just done so through the device of the point of order. I am grateful to her for giving me notice that she wished to raise this matter and I do take it very seriously. It is an important matter for her and for her constituents and it is certainly unsatisfactory—a point that I have made frequently over the years—if Ministers do not respond promptly to Members’ inquiries. A Member should not have to wait two-and-a-half months for a ministerial reply. I am afraid that I cannot offer her a sure route for securing a meeting with the Secretary of State—[Interruption.] Perhaps I can be allowed to respond to the point of order without people chuntering from a sedentary position. I cannot offer the hon. Lady a sure route for securing a meeting with the Secretary of State or even with the Under-Secretary. It is for the Minister concerned to decide whether or when to meet with a Member about a constituency matter, and there may occasionally be factors that legitimately make a meeting untimely, but my emphasis is on the word occasionally. On the whole, I think it is reasonable for Members who ask for a meeting with a Minister on a constituency matter to expect that such a meeting will be facilitated. It might not necessarily be with the Secretary of State, but such a meeting should usually be facilitated. The hon. Lady has put her concern on the record. No doubt, it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench and will be relayed to the Department. If she does not achieve the meeting she seeks, she might wish to ask the advice of the Table Office on other avenues that are open to her to pursue, but I hope that it will not be necessary for her to explore those alternative avenues.
Channel 4 (Relocation)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.10 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require Channel 4 to relocate its headquarters outside London; and for connected purposes.

Channel 4 is a publicly owned broadcaster and has undoubtedly made a huge contribution to British broadcasting. I am in no doubt that many Members on both sides have enjoyed watching the hours of quality broadcasting, from “Countdown” to “Gogglebox”, and from “Grand Designs” to “Come Dine with Me”. Indeed, I am sure there are many programmes that hon. and right hon. Members may not want to admit in this Chamber to watching, but they enjoy them all the same. However, the value of Channel 4 and the contribution it makes could have a much greater transformative impact if it were to relocate outside London.

Being in public ownership means that Channel 4 has a responsibility to the nation, not just in the innovative and boundary-probing programming that it rightly produces, but in the way in which it is organised and run. Truly, it must be operated for the benefit of all parts of our country, throughout all the nations and regions that make up the UK. We should consider the effects of the BBC’s relocation to Salford Quays, with the creation of MediaCityUK. The regeneration that comes from such investments has a much wider ripple effect beyond the transfer of the headquarters, staff and offices. With the right location, such moves can significantly boost prosperity across a whole region and help support thousands of jobs. As the Secretary of State said at the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport last week, more people are employed at Salford Quays today than there ever were when they were docks. That is a direct effect of a public service broadcaster fulfilling its remit in its most inclusive sense.

Channel 4 could have a significant transformative impact on a new location, with the potential to anchor wider regeneration and deliver jobs over and above those which move out of the capital. Very careful consideration must be given to location in order to maximise and extract value. There could be an open competition to decide on the new location, allowing interested areas and sites to put forward their case, ensuring that the site that delivers the greatest impact and fulfils the needs of Channel 4 is selected. This is not just about the benefits a move could have on a specific area; many organisations could have a similar impact from relocating their headquarters. There is greater significance in and much wider benefits from helping to rebalance the institutions of broadcasting within the UK to reflect more effectively the diverse communities in our constituencies across the country, and to bring a fresh perspective.

The realities faced on a daily basis by my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South and those in many constituencies throughout the UK are very different from those experienced in London. As I said, Channel 4 produces some phenomenal programmes that are greatly valued, but this could be so much better. If Channel 4 relocated out of London, the organisation and its employees would experience directly the true vibrancy and diversity across the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. The programmes it produces could be drawn from a much more diverse palette, giving a much greater scope, depth and quality to what we see on our screens.

As a commissioning organisation, Channel 4 has huge potential to support the wider broadcasting and creative sectors across the countries and regions of the UK. Many small and medium-sized businesses right across the country could contribute significantly to diversifying the content produced by Channel 4, but currently all the decisions are made in London and many companies and organisations are not getting a fair chance. A move would have much greater knock-on benefits across the industry, helping to support and create more highly skilled jobs outside London. Location is hugely important not only to extract the greatest benefit from our media, but to ensure that there are the skills available in the workforce to match the demands of the organisation.

There are a number of extremely interesting suggestions for a potential future location for this national broadcaster. They come from a number of areas across the country, including from my area, Stoke-on-Trent. Many parts of the country have the wealth of skills and creativity—both in industry and academia—needed to support the relocation. I know from visiting Staffordshire University that our academic institutions across the country have state-of-the-art digital and media facilities. For example, Staffordshire University is now rated the best in the country for computer gaming.

Industries and universities right across the country are leading the way in the digital and creative sectors. The move of Channel 4 out of London would further support this success and mean that more of those skills could be retained in other parts of the UK. This is the critical point: we are currently seeing a brain drain of skills and employment opportunities from across our country towards London. The Bill aligns with the Government’s industrial strategy to help to rebalance the economy, driving prosperity right across the country. I hope that all hon. Members can support that aim.

The further benefit that a move could realise is to counteract the consequences of an overheating property market in London. Land is much cheaper and more freely available outside London, particularly in areas like mine, meaning that the costs of development and moving have the potential with the right location to be significantly lower. Much of the cost of the move could probably be made back from the sale of Channel 4’s current headquarters site on Horseferry Road.

The cost of property also has an important effect on the likely quality of life of those working for Channel 4. Outside London, workers are likely to be able to afford a much better quality of life. The average house price in the Cities of London and Westminster constituency in quarter 1 of 2017 was £1,275,000 compared with £122,150 in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South. The Bill does not specify a location to which Channel 4 should move, but it secures the principle of a move away from London and would allow for the process in selecting a new location and facilitating the move once a location is agreed.

I encourage Members on both sides of the House to back this Bill and ensure that Channel 4 can continue to improve the quality and range of its broadcasting to reflect the entire UK.
Question put and agreed to.
Ordered,
That Jack Brereton, Ross Thomson, Ruth Smeeth, Andrew Bowie, Michael Fabricant, Rachel Maclean, Mr. Graham Brady, Gareth Snell and Eddie Hughes present the Bill.

Jack Brereton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October 2018, and to be printed (Bill 111).

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This private Bill was introduced in the other place in January 2016. It is being promoted by New Southgate Cemetery and Crematorium Ltd to enable it to use the burial space in the New Southgate cemetery more effectively and to provide greater capacity for new interment and burial in future years. The cemetery lies in my constituency, close to the boundary with Enfield.

The promoters, which I will refer to as the NSCC for brevity, are responsible for the administration of the cemetery under the terms of the Great Northern London Cemetery Act 1976. In 1990, ownership of part of the cemetery was transferred to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United Kingdom. The cemetery has real significance for the Baha’i community because one of its greatest spiritual leaders, Shoghi Effendi, is buried there. I understand that the Baha’i National Spiritual Assembly has expressed its support for the Bill.

People may ask why I am here today talking about cemeteries. Well, put simply, the problem is that the New Southgate cemetery is running out of space. Some 180,000 interments have been carried out there, but only around 1,800 burial spaces remain. With an average of 180 burials a year, all spaces are likely be full within 10 years if action is not taken. The Bill would address that problem by granting two new powers to the NSCC and the Baha’is. Those are based on powers already available to local authority-run cemeteries in London under section 9 of the Greater London Council (General Powers) Act 1976 and section 74 of the London Local Authorities Act 2007.

First, clause 3 would provide the promoters and the Baha’is with the power to extinguish rights of burial in grave spaces in the cemetery where a right of burial has not been exercised for 75 years or more. That would enable them to reclaim unused graves and make them available for new burials. Before those powers can be exercised, the Bill requires notices to be displayed in a cemetery and published in newspapers. The NSCC would also need to serve notices on the registered owner of a grave, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and Historic England. The Bill provides that if the registered owner of the burial right objects, the right of burial cannot be extinguished. If anybody else objects, the right cannot be extinguished without the Secretary of State’s consent. Compensation is payable where burial rights are extinguished.

The second main power conferred by the Bill is set out in clause 4 and would enable the promoters and the Baha’is to reuse existing graves. That would involve the following process: removing remains, excavating the grave to its deepest possible depth, reinterring the disturbed remains in a casket at the bottom of the deeper grave and using the additional space above the reinterred remains for new burials.

Under the Bill, that could be done only where two conditions are met: first, that no burial has taken place for at least 75 years; and, secondly, that no exclusive burial right previously existed, or the right of burial has been extinguished using the provisions in the Bill. If the
Bill is adopted, the NSCC or the Baha’is would be able to authorise re-use without the current requirement for a licence from the Secretary of State under section 25 of the Burial Act 1857.

Before exercising this power, the NSCC and the Baha’is would have to give notice, as I described earlier in my remarks. If an objection is made by the registered owner of the extinguished right of burial, the owner of a memorial on the grave or the relative of a person buried there, the powers may not be used for a further 25 years. The Bill requires the promoters and the Baha’is to keep records of any memorial removed, and a public record of the disturbance and reinterment of remains.

Prior to the promotion of the Bill, the promoters consulted cemetery users, local authorities, various religious orders and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on what they intended to propose in it, and the response to that consultation was positive. No petitions were deposited against the Bill in either House.

The Bill was given a Second Reading by this House following a debate on 29 November 2016, where it was proposed by the former Member of Parliament for Enfield Southgate, David Burrowes. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to his work on the Bill and on so many other important parliamentary and constituency matters. We miss him.

Consideration of the Bill took place in an Unopposed Bill Committee on 24 January 2017. I gather that the Chairman of Ways and Means pointed out during those proceedings that cemeteries can sometimes be important wildlife habitats—a sentiment with which I wholeheartedly agree. Concern was expressed about a statement by the promoters regarding the maintenance of the cemetery and potential habitats, and corrections were subsequently made.

A constituent also got in touch to challenge a statement regarding the extent of tree protection orders. She believed that the TPOs referred to in Committee all related to the cemetery a sustainable future for the benefit of my constituents in Chipping Barnet and for residents living in a wider area in the boroughs of Enfield and Barnet and beyond. The changes proposed are relatively modest and reflect the position that already applies in relation to cemeteries owned by local authorities. It is only because New Southgate cemetery happens to be privately owned that statute does not already provide the powers sought in the Bill. The promoters have given important undertakings about how those powers will be exercised. As a result of this debate, these are now formally on record, including the commitment to notify the Minister at the Minister of Justice in the relevant circumstances.

There are important cultural reasons to back this legislation. Barnet and Enfield are among the most ethnically diverse boroughs in the country and are home to people of many different faiths. Burial is preferred over cremation for many in the Catholic and Greek Orthodox communities. The NSCC tells me that its experience with the black Caribbean community has also indicated a preference for burial for many in the Catholic and Greek Orthodox communities. The NSCC tells me that its experience with the black Caribbean community has also indicated a preference for burial for many in the Catholic and Greek Orthodox communities.

Moreover, as I pointed out on Second Reading, there are important conservation reasons for supporting the Bill. If we fail to take steps to ensure that we use our existing burial space effectively, pressure will grow for new cemeteries. Establishing those on green-belt land or in other suburban green spaces would damage the quality of life for my constituents and would also see a loss of valued wildlife habitats. That is one of the reasons I am opposing such a proposal for a new burial ground on the green belt in Arkley in my constituency.

For all those reasons, I appeal to the House to support the Bill. I very much hope that it will be given its Third Reading this afternoon.

2.31 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for her very full introduction to this
Third Reading debate. I objected to the Third Reading going through on the nod because I thought it important that the undertakings given in Committee were recorded in this Chamber so that everybody could look back and see the nature of those undertakings.

I echo my right hon. Friend’s tribute to our colleague who lost his seat at the general election. David Burrowes was an outstanding Member of Parliament. He was a really easy-going colleague and we had many a wry laugh not just about this Bill but lots of other things. He had a great twinkle in his eye, which I am sure he has not lost as a result of his electoral experience.

I would also like to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. With private Bill procedure, one often thinks that if the business goes to an Unopposed Bill Committee there will not really be any effective scrutiny and it will go through on the nod. The record of the role that you played in the Unopposed Bill Committee shows that you were rigorous in exploring matters and putting questions to the promoters, some of which they answered more easily than others. As a result, they wrote to you on 2 February setting out the four undertakings, which I will not repeat because my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, indicated, the promoters will send those undertakings to the Ministry of Justice, so that the Minister may place the information in the Library of the House. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on moving the Third Reading of this private Bill. I associate myself with her comments and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) with regard to the later Member for Enfield Southgate. In addition to all those comments, which I support, I would say that if there is one thing I remember about him, it is his core decency. As a consequence, he really is a loss to the House.

As I said on an earlier occasion, we are participating in one of Parliament’s less used procedures. It is nevertheless significant, in that it enables organisations to seek to disapply or modify the general law in relation to their own powers. Our debate here today, like earlier discussions on this Bill, has been aimed at ensuring that the promoters have put in place, or have agreed to observe, appropriate measures to ensure the proper exercise of the modifications to the law that they seek. I am grateful to all hon. Members both here and in another place who have contributed to this important process during the Bill’s passage. The result is a comprehensive and robust set of provisions that will enable New Southgate cemetery to continue to serve its communities into the future while ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place.

As I have said before, the Bill addresses the needs of New Southgate cemetery, and the Government do not wish to prevent the cemetery from remaining viable in this way. On Second Reading, I confirmed that I was satisfied with the engagement that the promoters had undertaken with faith groups using the cemetery. In a subsequent letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, I expressed my expectation that in exercising the powers conferred by this Bill, the New Southgate cemetery burial authorities would continue to ensure that relevant faith and cultural sensitivities are taken into account and would continue to have due regard to available guidance and best practice. This issue was explored further in some detail in Committee. As a result, the promoters have given a written undertaking that before exercising any powers under clause 4, they will carry out a survey of the faith groups affected to ensure compliance with my expectations, and will publish their findings and proposed best practice. I am grateful to the Committee for securing this undertaking and to the promoters for agreeing to it.

Also as a result of discussion in Committee, the promoters have given an undertaking to publicise in a Greater London newspaper, within three months of Royal Assent, the power to extinguish burial rights in the cemetery. They have also given an undertaking that before exercising any powers under clause 4, they will carry out a nature conservation assessment of the cemetery grounds in accordance with the technical guidance current at the time. Again, I am grateful to those who have proposed and agreed to these undertakings.

Of course, giving undertakings is one thing and carrying them out is another. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is rightly concerned to ensure that the promoters’ compliance with these conditions is demonstrated to Parliament. In answer to the question on tree protection, this particular cemetery will, in any event, be obliged to comply with any tree preservation orders that are in place. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet indicated, the promoters have agreed to provide to the Ministry of Justice copies of the documentation arising from the three undertakings on the newspaper advertisement, the findings of the faith groups survey and best practice, and the nature conservation assessment. They will also be publishing the documents on their website. I give an undertaking of my own to the House today that on receipt of those documents, I will place them in the House Libraries, where they will be available for scrutiny by Members. I hope that that mechanism will satisfy the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch.

The promoters have given a fourth undertaking to the House—not to sell for commercial gain any memorial removed under sections 3 or 4 of the Act without the consent of the registered owner. Compliance with this
condition will be monitored by means of the requirement for the burial authority to keep a record of each memorial that is removed and to deposit a copy of that record with the Registrar General. It would also be possible to scrutinise the burial authority’s accounts, which, as it is a registered company, are published.

In conclusion, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch for securing this debate and for his diligence in seeking to put on record the means by which the promoters will demonstrate compliance with their undertakings to this House. I trust that the explanations provided have allayed his concerns, and I am grateful to all who have contributed to today’s proceedings.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, I would like to bring in Theresa Villiers.

2.40 pm

Theresa Villiers: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to say a very few words. As others have done, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch for his always assiduous scrutiny of private Members’ business. I express my gratitude to the Minister for the work that he has done to agree the undertakings, and for his promises about the work that the Ministry of Justice will carry out as a result of those undertakings. I thank my constituent who contacted me about this Bill to express her concerns about nature conservation at the cemetery. Finally, I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your careful scrutiny of the process. I am happy to commend this Bill to the House and I hope it will command a majority this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Middle Level Bill: Revival

That the promoters of the Middle Level Bill, which originated in this House in the previous Session on 24 January 2017, may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of bills).—(The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.)

2.42 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to support the revival of this important Bill and pleased to have the chance, once again, to discuss it on the Floor of the House.

Some Members will recall that the Middle Level Bill received its Second Reading on 29 March 2017, following a debate including a range of contributions from hon. and right hon. Members, but it was lost at the Dissolution of Parliament ahead of the general election. I do not intend to repeat the whole of my speech from that debate—[Interruption.] It is lovely to hear a request from Labour Front Benchers for more, but I will contain myself, despite their obvious enthusiasm. I will set out the basic details of the Bill and the reasons why we should legislate, as well as what has happened since we last debated the measure and the changes that have been proposed to respond to concerns raised in petitions and by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), who has assiduously followed the progress of this Bill.

To be clear, the Bill is being promoted by the Middle Level Commissioners, a statutory corporation constituted under the Middle Level Act 1862. The commissioners provide flood defence and water level management to the Middle Level area and are the navigation authority for the Middle Level river system. Many Members who have seen the title of the debate on the Order Paper will probably wonder what the Middle Level is. The Middle Level is the central and largest section of the Great Level of the Fens, which was reclaimed by drainage during the mid-17th century. The area is bounded to the north-west and the east by the Nene and Ouse washes, to the north by the previously drained marshland silts, and to the south and west by low clay hills.

The Middle Level river system consists of more than 120 miles of watercourses, approximately 100 miles of which are statutory navigations, and it has a catchment of just over 170,000 acres. Virtually all the fenland within the Middle Level catchment lies below mean sea level. The Middle Level Commissioners, together with the local internal drainage boards, therefore operate a highly complex flood protection and water level management system to balance the various water uses and requirements, and to alleviate the risk of flooding to land and properties. The efficient operation of the system is vital to the safety and prosperity of the more than 100,000 people who live and work in the area and the 26,000 properties that depend on it. But for the operations of the commissioners and the local boards, much of the fenland would be underwater for a lot of the year, access from higher ground would be cut off, and many of the present land uses would be completely impossible.

Although the Middle Level was built primarily for drainage reasons, it has gone on to be used by a range of craft, particularly pleasure craft and motorboats. That brings us to the key point with any legislation: why
do we need to legislate? The current system of regulation is hopelessly out of date and based on a different era of waterways usage. Our forebears in the 19th century viewed canals as a practical method of transporting goods and a working location, rather than as an attractive place for a holiday, hence measures such as an exemption from charges relating to manure-carrying. The success of many waterways today in recreation is due to the fact that they have a system of regulation and income generation that reflects the needs of boat users today, rather than those of the 19th century. That is why the current legal framework for the Middle Level needs to be updated.

That legal framework does not include adequate provision for the registration of vessels used on the waterways, or for the levying of charges for the use of the waterways and associated facilities. In particular, the commissioners may levy charges only on commercial traffic, not on pleasure craft. That is presumably because, in the past, the extent of commercial traffic was considered sufficient to pay for the costs of navigation. Again, that shows a different understanding of the use of waterways. However, commercial traffic on the Middle Level is now virtually non-existent. Almost all the vessels are pleasure craft, and they benefit from an exemption from charging under the old Acts.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend—he is a very good friend—for giving way. I am listening to him with rapt attention, and I heard him say that the entirety of the Middle Level is below sea level. I do not know the area, so could he tell me if that means that the rivers cannot get out—does the stuff have to be pumped out?—and traffic on the waterways cannot get out of this sunken level? I admit that I am pretty ignorant about the area.

Kevin Foster: There are ways of getting from the Middle Level to other waterways. It connects to some waterways that have much more modern systems of regulation. Most of it is below mean sea level, but my understanding is that it is possible to get boats into and out of other watercourses.

The Middle Level was built as a very large drain—that is the best way of putting it—but in its usage it has become more like a canal. Such waterways work very successfully in other areas of the country, but the problem with the Middle Level is that its ability to generate income is based on its original design and conception, rather than its modern-day usage. Following on from my hon. Friend’s helpful intervention, I will talk about the issues concerning the income for maintaining the Middle Level.

At the moment, the commissioners do not receive any income from the navigation of the waterways because of the virtual non-existence of commercial traffic. That has meant that monies raised through drainage rates and levies have had to be used to fund navigation, instead of for flood defences. In the financial year ending 31 March 2016, that unfunded expenditure amounted to £178,000. The commissioners therefore seek to update and clarify their powers to enable them properly to regulate and fund their waterways. For comparison, the powers sought are similar to those already used by other large inland navigation authorities, such as the Canal and River Trust, the Environment Agency and the Broads Authority.

The commissioners consulted on their proposals between February and June 2016. They notified affected parties, including navigation interests, land drainage interests and local authorities. They published newspaper notices and placed details on their website. Some 23 responses were received, 18 of which were supportive, with three neutral and two opposed. Supporters included the Inland Waterways Association, the East Anglian Waterways Association, the Association of Nene River Clubs, the National Association of Boat Owners, the Middle Level Watermen’s Club, the Residential Boat Owners Association, the Association of Waterway Cruising Clubs and five local authorities.

After the Bill was deposited, six petitions were received against it. They raise a range of issues to which the commissioners intend to respond in their evidence before the Opposed Bill Committee, but some significant work has already been done—assisted, I must say, by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch—to respond to many of the issues raised in the petitions. Likewise, work has been done to respond to concerns raised by Members on 29 March 2017, although I was pleased to note that the Bill then had the support of both Government and Opposition Front Benchers. There was a pledge to respond to the issues in the Opposed Bill Committee, but that Committee could not sit before Parliament was dissolved for the general election.

The six petitions deposited against the Bill were from individuals with varying interests in the navigation of the waterways forming the Middle Level, as well as from the March Cruising Club and the National Bargee Travellers Association. It should be noted that none of the operators of the private marinas in the Middle Level has objected to proposals to include their marinas within the scope of the commissioners’ regulatory powers. The commissioners met all the petitioners in July and August, and responded to each of their petitions in writing in September. One of the petitioners has indicated that he is now willing to withdraw his petition, but the irony is that he cannot do so until the Bill is formally revived. I am advised by the commissioners that, as yet, no other responses have been received.

It should be noted that although some of the petitioners did not accept during those meetings that there was a need for the commissioners to raise funds from navigation users, more were concerned that the fees should be predictable and affordable, and that the commissioners would guarantee to provide improved services and facilities in return for those charges. In addition, none of the petitioners, as is logical, took issue with the need for vessels to meet the standards of the boat safety scheme or to carry third-party insurance, as required by the Bill. Another problem with the age of the existing legislation is that it dates from before modern considerations of boat safety and third-party insurance.

The commissioners intend to give an undertaking, and to propose amendments to the Bill before the Committee stage, if the Bill is revived. They include setting up a users’ panel that would discuss an annual programme of maintenance and improvements before each year’s charges were set. The commissioners propose an amendment to clause 5(3) so that Well Creek is not closed to navigation between Christmas and new year. They also propose an amendment so that the person in charge of a vessel is not required to provide the names and addresses of others on board.
If the Bill is revived, I am confident that the remaining outstanding issues will be appropriately considered by the Opposed Bill Committee. At that stage, both the commissioners and the petitioners will have the opportunity to give evidence supporting their cases before the Committee determines whether the principle of the Bill has been proved. In addition to the points I have outlined, I am aware that the commissioners, via their solicitors, have been in contact with the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch to deal with a number of the individual issues that they have raised, which they may wish to set out again in this debate.

I hope my speech will satisfy Members to the extent that they will agree to revive the Bill. I accept that some users of the waterway are happy with an arrangement under which they are provided with a facility that others pay for, yet the current situation cannot be sustainable, and the provisions in the Bill reflect the system used to manage other waterways.

It is worth noting that locks have to be maintained to provide access to the system—if this was purely about drainage, the locks could be converted into weirs. In response to the query raised by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), I confirm that it is possible to get out of the system via those locks. That reflects the fact that this is not just a big drainage canal that happens to have some boat usage, but a system—built for drainage, and funded as though it was drain—that is actually maintained to provide access for motorboats and particularly for pleasure craft, which at the moment contribute absolutely nothing towards its maintenance and do not meet some of the most basic standards. I hope that that explains to Members why the Bill needs to be revived.

The commissioners accept that any use of new powers must be proportionate, and that the Bill will not give them anything beyond what other waterways have. A sign of their good faith is that some of the locks have to be maintained to provide access to the system—if this was purely about drainage, the locks could be converted into weirs. In response to the query raised by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), I confirm that it is possible to get out of the system via those locks. That reflects the fact that this is not just a big drainage canal that happens to have some boat usage, but a system—built for drainage, and funded as though it was drain—that is actually maintained to provide access for motorboats and particularly for pleasure craft, which at the moment contribute absolutely nothing towards its maintenance and do not meet some of the most basic standards. I hope that that explains to Members why the Bill needs to be revived.

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In other words, they do not deny that they would or could interfere in the rights of boat dwellers to continue to reside on their boats in the Middle Level. The commissioners continue:

“If the Commissioners could not do this, they would not be able to exercise the powers.”

That is a circular argument, and it typifies the problem that will continue to exist if the Bill makes progress. The commissioners have not responded adequately to the concerns expressed by people who have exercised the right to live on the Middle Level waterways, as has been the case for centuries, and to exercise navigation rights without being subject to penal charges and undue regulation.

As with many private Bills, as soon as such a measure is introduced all sorts of people come along and say, “Why don’t we regulate this? Why don’t we regulate that?” It is like a Christmas tree, with a whole lot more regulatory powers attached to it. Many of those powers, the House will find, are over the top and disproportionate, so I hope that in due course we can achieve a Bill that is much better than the current one. I had hoped that the Bill’s promoters would withdraw it and go back to square one, but they have not done so, which leaves us in the situation we are in. The agents acting for the promoters have been courteous and so on, but when they see what is going to happen next, I hope that their courtesy will be accompanied by a lot more substance, so that the serious concerns of Bargee Travellers can be met.

The last time we debated this, we heard a contribution from our then hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough, Stewart Jackson. He took this cause very much to heart, and I thank him for the contribution that he made on behalf of his constituents and other Bargee Travellers. We owe it to him to be able to continue that campaign, and it is great that we have the hon. Member for Cambridge on our side as well.

3.3 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I shall keep my contribution fairly brief, but I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing the Bill back to the House in a revived form. I am talking about the Bill, not my hon. Friend. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group for waterways whose constituency is served by canals, and as a boating enthusiast, I spoke on Second Reading, before the progress of the Bill was halted by the general election. I was therefore keen to make another contribution on the record today.

Across the country, we have benefited over the years from a network of canals, waterways and navigation systems. Once the means of transporting goods, today their use is much more leisure-oriented, but some of our waterways, as many of us know, still transport goods and some of them, as we have heard, are home to those who choose to live on the water. As a result of the work of organisations such as the Canal & River Trust, the Inland Waterways Association, voluntary groups and others, there has been a remarkable revival of our waterways. Canals, waterways, levels and drains all need ongoing maintenance, which can be expensive but is vital and integral to the operation of our waterways system.

Today’s debate focuses on the Middle Level, which is the largest section of the Great Level of the Fens, an area reclaimed through drainage, as we have heard. It is important to remember that in our deliberations. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay explained very clearly that the Bill sought to modernise the operational powers of the commissioners, allowing them to levy charges on use of the waterways and to require payment for their navigation functions. That is vital because, as we have heard, all the fenland in the Middle Level catchment is below mean sea level. The commissioners’ work, together with that of the internal drainage boards is vital in providing flood protection and water level management.

We have heard that under the current system, commissioners do not receive any income from navigation of the waterways—unlike arrangements for other waterways and canals that allow organisations to levy fees from licences. The measures sought in the Bill would help with the maintenance and navigation of the level, and would put it on a more sustainable footing. They are reasonable and rational, and I really hope that the Bill is allowed to proceed in its revised form and make progress. I recall that on Second Reading the question of consultation was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope). Reading background papers and listening to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay today, it seems as if the commissioners have taken the opportunity in the intervening period to seek to address those concerns, which is welcome. I therefore hope that the Bill is revived and that it can continue to make progress through Parliament, so that the funding and sustainability of the waterways is on a much firmer footing. That will enable the commissioners to maintain the fabric of our drainage systems and, in doing so, maintain our waterways for the benefit of all.

3.6 pm

Kevin Foster: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a pleasure to respond briefly to the debate. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) raised the issue of fees. The commissioners recognise that for people with houseboats fees must be proportionate, appropriate and reasonable. They cannot provide a definitive answer on the exact level of fees to be charged, but they have said that Environment Agency charges include a significant discount for houseboat dwellers. They believe that they are likely to adopt a similar charging structure: there will not be just one charge for a particular size of boat, but a sliding scale based on the nature of usage. I acknowledge the comments made by my hon. Friend. The Commission for Christchurch about protections for houseboats, but it is worth remembering that in law and convention rights, any reaction must be proportionate, particularly when dealing with someone’s home. The idea that there are no legal protections if the Bill is enacted is not correct, but we can explore that in more detail in Committee with the National Bargee Travellers Association with a view to achieving a result with which everyone is comfortable.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who again showed her passion for waterways and spoke about the need to ensure that arrangements are effective and modern so that the relevant institutions can go forward and create income to make themselves self-sufficient. I welcome...
her support, and I am sure she is looking forward to serving on the Opposed Bill Committee, where there will be some interesting debates.

We have had an interesting debate, and I hope that Members support the Bill. It was right, given that it had received wider support and secured a Second Reading, to revive it with some amendments to take on board concerns that have been expressed, rather than going back to the drawing board, which would delay the process of getting on with a modern system of regulation for the Middle Level that will be of benefit to all users in the long run.

_question put and agreed to._

**Backbench Business**

_The Rohingya and the Myanmar Government_

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 10 October 2017, on violence in Rakhine State, HC 435; and correspondence received by the Foreign Affairs Committee from the Foreign Secretary, dated 26 September 2017, and from the Ambassador of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, dated 6 October 2017, on violence in Rakhine State, reported to the House on 10 October 2017.]

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** I warn Back Benchers that to give everybody a fair chance of being heard, there will be a four-minute limit on contributions after the opening speeches. Front Benchers winding up will have 10 minutes each. If we keep to that, we should be able to accommodate everybody.

3.9 pm

**Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House agrees with the statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that the treatment of the Rohingya by the Myanmar Government amounts to a textbook case of ethnic cleansing.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, to my co-sponsor the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and to the 73 Members who supported the application.

The Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar have been the subject of decades of segregation and racial discrimination. Over the past few years, they have repeatedly been indiscriminately targeted by the Burmese military, and in the past month they have witnessed human rights violations on a scale extreme even by the standards of Myanmar’s history. Following the 25 August attack on Government buildings by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the Burmese military, led by Min Aung Hlaing, have been responsible for attacks that have led to more than 582,000 Rohingya fleeing for their lives by crossing the border into Bangladesh.

There are now almost 1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh: the 582,000 who had already fled there following previous periods of targeted attacks, notably in 2012 and 2016. There is a further influx of refugees from Myanmar who are being driven out of Rakhine state because food markets in the west of the region have been shut down and crucial aid deliveries restricted. Today, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said that between 10,000 and 15,000 Rohingya people have been stranded since Sunday night at the Anjuman Para border crossing point between Bangladesh and Myanmar. These border pathways are particularly dangerous; Amnesty International accuses the Myanmar Government of having laid landmines in the path of fleeing women and children only a few weeks ago.

Last week, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published its rapid response mission report from Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh. A team of three were deployed to Bangladesh in September following the reports of deadly violence and grave human rights abuses committed by the military from
The Rohingya and the Myanmar Government

25 August onwards. The UN team conducted 65 interviews with many refugees who had recently crossed the border. The UN’s job was to establish the facts about what was happening in northern Rakhine and its report makes uncomfortable reading.

Following the attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the military started what it calls a “clearance operation”. Unimaginable violations of human rights have taken place during this time. According to the UN team, several victims reported the killing of close family members by random gunfire or described how the Myanmar security forces surrounded villages at some distance and then shot indiscriminately at houses and individuals alike.

The report also details witness accounts that attest to Rohingya victims, including children and elderly people, being burned to death inside their houses. As the UN mission progressed and the team spoke to more women and girls, horrific accounts of sexual violence were shared. According to the report, girls aged as young as five or seven were raped, often in front of their relatives—sometimes by three to five men all dressed in army uniforms taking turns. The report goes on to detail accounts of summary executions, cases of torture and disappearances. Alongside those horrendous human rights violations are accounts of forced displacements and the destruction of religious and cultural buildings and other items.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have given evidence in such situations. Are these war crimes being put forward by the United Nations for prosecutions? Those should start right now.

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue, and I could not agree more. I hope that the Minister will take that as one of the action points of our Government, to build on the leadership that they are showing. We would like to see that item on the agenda.

The UN report backs up the comment made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in his opening statement at the 36th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council that the situation in Myanmar is a textbook example of ethnic cleansing. That builds on the call, made by Yanghee Lee earlier in Myanmar is a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.

United Nations Human Rights Council that the situation was moving towards that. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister will take that as one of the action points of our Government, to build on the leadership that they are showing. We would like to see that item on the agenda.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): During Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions earlier, I asked the Minister for Asia and the Pacific—a good Minister—to comment on the textbook definition of ethnic cleansing. I believe that he went further than the UK Government have gone before in saying that the situation was moving towards that. Does my hon. Friend agree that for the UK to have legitimacy on this topic, we should back up the UN’s assessment that the situation is a textbook case of ethnic cleansing?

Rushanara Ali: I very much hope that our Government will back up that definition.

The House will be aware that in 1993 the final report of the Commission of Experts, which was established following UN Security Council resolution 780, defined ethnic cleansing as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.” That is a textbook definition to which the motion refers and against which we must measure what is happening in Myanmar. The question is whether the events in Burma amount to “a purposeful policy”. Are violent and terror-inspiring means being used? Is a specific ethnic or religious group being removed from certain geographical areas? The answer is yes to all the above.

We are witnessing a deliberate state-sponsored policy of terror, murder, arson, rape and torture designed to remove the Rohingya people from their homes. There is now such an overwhelming weight of evidence of ethnic cleansing that Members cannot fail to agree and nor can the Government. It is vital that Members of this Parliament, which is seen as a beacon of democracy in the world, send a powerful message today that we will stand with the people being persecuted, the Rohingya population and other minorities in Myanmar.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and her powerful contribution. Does she agree that although we welcome the Government’s action on stopping training support for military personnel, the Government should pause all other such programmes that they fund, through the Department for International Development and elsewhere, while we reflect on how best to respond to the ethnic cleansing that she has so powerfully described?

Rushanara Ali: I believe that all humanitarian efforts and pressure on the Government for access should be retained but that other non-essential programmes should be reviewed so that we can consider what to do to bring an end to the violence and find a longer-term solution that brings peace to the region and protects the Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar.

As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Burma, I have been aware of the discrimination and mistreatment that the Rohingya have endured for decades. In 2013, following a series of violent clashes in 2012 and left more than 100,000 people internally displaced, I visited Myanmar with Refugees International and the Burma Campaign. I heard stories of how Rohingya communities had fled violent attacks to remote areas of the countryside. In Rakhine state, the camps where Rohingya had been forced to live were horrific, with little or no access to humanitarian aid or healthcare. Some of that pressure was relieved, but international agencies had limited access. I travelled by boat to a UNHCR-supported camp in Pauktaw and have vivid memories of the shores nearby being covered in faeces and of dead rats floating just metres away from children bathing to keep cool in the unbearable heat. I remember being told stories of loved ones being killed and of children dying from a lack of healthcare and women from a lack of support in childbirth.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her speech, with which everybody in the House will agree. I hope she will be encouraged by a statement put out at last week’s plenary session of the Council of Europe by the Political Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, condemning the action and calling on all 47 Council of Europe member
states to help with the humanitarian relief effort and to support Burma and Bangladesh. It shows that concern goes much wider than this House and that there is a huge international effort going on.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I remind the House that we need short interventions if everyone is to have a fair chance to speak in this important debate.

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful for that intervention and hope that other Governments will add their support to the humanitarian effort. The UN has stated that more than £440 million is required, but only a fraction of that has been raised. I hope that our Government will encourage other Governments, in the EU and the wider international community, to provide more assistance to the humanitarian effort in Rakhine, Bangladesh and other neighbouring states dealing with the more than 1 million refugees.

Much of the forced segregation stems from the Citizenship Law of 1982, which sets out that full citizenship in Myanmar is based on membership of one of the national races, a category awarded only to those considered to have settled in Myanmar prior to 1824, the date of the first occupation by the British. In Myanmar’s national census of 2014, the Muslim minority group was initially allowed to self-identify as Rohingya, but the Government later reversed this freedom and deemed that they could be identified only as Bengali, which they do not accept because they are not Bengali.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point about nationality, except that the British Government have shown to the Government in Nay Pyi Taw evidence kept in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office referring to a Muslim population in that part of what is now Burma going back many hundreds of years.

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and former Minister for that intervention, as it corrects the misconception that the Rohingya population have no right to be there and are somehow refugees from neighbouring Bangladesh.

Eight months before polling day, the President of Myanmar revoked all temporary registration cards, leaving many Rohingya Muslims without any form of identity and hence unable to cast their votes during the transition to democracy. Despite Aung San Suu Kyi’s election victory, her renowned endeavours as a human rights and pro-democracy campaigner and her own sacrifice and fight for democracy for her fellow countrymen and women, many have expressed grave disappointment at her failure to speak out and raise her voice on behalf of the persecuted minorities of her country, particularly the Rohingya. I share that sadness and disappointment, as someone who, like many in the House, grew up admiring her fight for democracy and courage, but alongside that disappointment we need to focus on the military Government, who hold the balance of power and control the military, defence, policing, local government, the civil service and many other aspects of power. While the media rightly focus attention on Aung San Suu Kyi, an important international figure, we should not let the military and the generals off the hook; let us both hold the civilian Government and particularly the military to account.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What safeguards should the British Government apply before resuming funding for military training in Myanmar?

Rushanara Ali: I will come to that. I am grateful that the Government, in response to 170 parliamentarians urging greater humanitarian assistance, have stepped up and increased their assistance by £25 million and increased the level of match funding for the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal, to which we are all grateful. The parliamentarians asked, however, for a suspension of training, and they were right to do so, especially given, as I understand it, there is no reference in it to human rights training or awareness and no attempt to change the behaviour of the military. It would be wrong to reinstate the funding until progress is made.

The Annan commission reported on the need for reconciliation and action to deal with the issues affecting the Rohingya and the wider populations impoverished in Rakhine. Sadly, the report’s publication coincided with the so-called operation by the military that led to the latest crisis. That suggests that the military, far from wanting a constructive solution, reconciliation and progress, is doing quite the opposite. The commission, which was commissioned, supported and led by Aung San Suu Kyi, has been undermined by the actions of the military, which says a great deal about its underlying objective, which is to undermine her. She, of course, is not helping herself, as many would agree, but let us not forget that the military has been instrumental in directing the attacks.

The international community needs to apply pressure on the military. To do that, our Government need seriously to consider a global arms embargo of the Burmese military, building on what we have done domestically and with our European partners. It will not work simply to wring our hands and say, “There is ethnic cleansing”, if we do not follow up with the courage of our convictions, act and apply pressure to the Burmese military. It is no longer acceptable to say that the transition to democracy will stop the military acting this way. It has not. In fact, the military is undermining the transition to democracy and the civilian-led Government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. It is imperative that the international community do more to support the humanitarian effort and, in particular, humanitarian access within Rakhine state, which I visited in February once again. The lack of access to those desperately in need of food and healthcare in the internally displaced camps was shocking.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to raise these issues, and I very much hope that our Government will continue to build on our tradition as a country that speaks up for communities that have suffered. Particularly in this case, Britain has a unique responsibility because of our colonial legacy, and because of our interest in Myanmar. We all want that country to succeed and thrive, and we all hoped that the transition to democracy would be a new chapter. Sadly, this series of attacks, particularly after the elections, has left many of us with grave doubts about that transition. We must do everything we can to bring an end to the violence and to increase access, but, most important, to hold the Burmese military to account.

I call on the Government to seek that global embargo, and to apply pressure on our international partners to act. We cannot once again allow ethnic cleansing to happen.
We must learn the lessons of what took place in Rwanda, in Bosnia and elsewhere. We cannot come back to the House and say “Never again” when we have watched ethnic cleansing happen, and regret not taking greater action and using all the powers and influences that we all have here in the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I remind the House that there is a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. I call Anne Main.

3.29 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Four minutes is not long enough to illustrate the suffering that I saw in Bangladesh only three weeks ago, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

I pledged to the people whom I met in the camps—mostly women and children—that if nothing else, we would come back and give them a voice that could be heard. We went with a delegation from the Conservative Friends of Bangladesh, and we spent two days in Cox’s Bazar. We were not prevented from speaking to anyone. We went there with Bengali Sylheti speakers who could translate very well for us, and we asked questions of anyone we liked. Their stories were all the same. There were stick-thin children who looked as if they were literally within days of dying. There were women who were unaccompanied by their menfolk because they had been slaughtered, brutally attacked or separated from them, beaten up and taken away.

We visited both the Kutupalong camp and the Balukhali camp. In the Balukhali camp, we talked to workers in an aid hospital about the wounds that people showed as they came in. Many were gunshot wounds. While we were there, an elderly man was brought in, his face gashed and bleeding. He was distressed and had been beaten up. A few minutes later, his son was carried in, gashed and bleeding. He was distressed and had been brought in the floods. The Bangladesh Government cannot be congratulated enough for how much they are doing, but the tide of misery is overwhelming.

Sir Hugo Swire: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. She has talked of a tide of misery. Alas, the tide of misery does not just flow across the Bay of Bengal from Rakhine to Cox’s Bazar; it also flows from Rakhine down to Malaysia and other countries, where we have seen horrific evidence of the trafficking of the Rohingya people. People come down from the Bay of Bengal and pick them up in Rakhine—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I know that the former Minister has a lot to add to this, but I want to get everyone in. Interventions must be very short. Do not take advantage of other Members, please.

Mrs Main: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Time is very short, and I wish to keep within my limit so that others can make their points.

I must emphasise that the stories we heard were consistent. Any claims in the newspapers that the Rohingya are doing this to themselves are lies, fabrications and absolute fantasy. That is not true. No woman wants to trek with eight small children after one of her sons has been stabbed through the chest, her breasts dried up because she cannot feed her child, and with only some semolina to keep her going for days. The Rohingya are not doing this to themselves. If the world sucks up that nonsense, that lie, that fabrication, we are complicit; and we cannot be complicit.

We saw where those people were stranded in no man’s land, within yards of the border. We heard too many stories that were consistent: people were being machine-gunned from behind to drive them across, and the landmines were to stop them going back. These people have been brutalised. There are thousands of unaccompanied children. It has been said that there are 80,000, although it is hard to give an accurate figure because the number increases every day. Apparently there were 11,000 last Monday.

When we were last told, there were 80,000 pregnant women and 13,000 unaccompanied children. There are real issues of safeguarding and trafficking, and of disease. We used the latrines on the site; believe me, it was a relief to go back and wash off the slop and stench we had experienced those days—only to go back and see the people the next day, sitting there with no more than a piece of plastic over their heads. Some of them did not even have that: some had an umbrella, some had nothing.

We cannot turn a blind eye. We cannot pretend it is not happening. It is so easy once we are back to forget the sheer horror of it, but for them this is not just about now; it has been happening for years. As the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, who so eloquently opened the debate, said, this has a very long history. But for those babies and children we saw, who are at any moment liable to be taken away with typhoid or one of
the other diseases just waiting to rampage through that camp, we have got to say the world must join with Bangladesh on this.

I cannot say any more than that: the Bangladeshis have done their utmost, with a third of their own country underwater, and with rice harvests being lost. One should go and see and look at the poor quality of the site; when we were there, an elephant trampled down the camp and there were landslides. This site is so fragile, yet Bangladesh has extended its arms to be as welcoming as it possibly can be. So I will not hear a word said against what they have been doing, but the rest of the world could do so much more. As the hon. Lady said, we must encourage our neighbours who feel this is someone else’s problem, because it very much is our problem.

I did not hear any anger from these people; they want to go back, but they do not want to go back to be driven across the border again and again and again. They want some degree of resolution to their plight, and I hope by talking about it on the Floor of this House today we will show that we will not make sure their stories have got back, and the hon. today I know the two colleagues who joined me are making sure their voice is heard by the world, because that is what I pledge. That is all I could say to the people. I was deeply moved by their compassion, and I share their anger. Enough. I was deeply moved by their compassion, and I share their anger. Enough. I was deeply moved by their compassion, and I share their anger. Enough. I was deeply moved by their compassion, and I share their anger. Enough. I was deeply moved by their compassion, and I share their anger. Enough. I was deeply moved by their compassion, and I share their anger. Enough. 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We must also say that there must never again be a genocide, because that is what this is. We have said it before, about Bosnia and about Rwanda—which I have had quite a lot to do with—but we must say it again now. We must step up to the plate and actually do something to stop this crisis continuing. A lot has happened and many thousands of people have lost their lives. Many more have lost everything they have, and they have little dignity left. This Government must please continue to work with every other country that can help to stop this happening, and they must do it now.

3.43 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let us be absolutely clear: the Rohingya have been persecuted and mistreated in that region for hundreds of years, and the United Nations has labelled them the most persecuted people in the world. However, their past persecution pales into insignificance compared with what they have recently faced. They have been subjected to some of the deadliest violence over the past several months. Rohingya men, women and children are being murdered. Children are being beheaded and their bodies mutilated. Others are being burned alive, and there is rape and pillage on a scale fit for a medieval war. All of this amounts to some of the gravest crimes against humanity. The burning of Rohingya villages is not just an act of pure violence; it is also a calculated move by the Burmese Government to ensure that the Rohingya can never return to their homes, even if the violence subsides. Such a move—and the intent behind it—is a textbook definition of ethnic cleansing.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has indeed described the situation as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government must do everything in their power to bring an end to the horrific violence?

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must not shy away from calling the situation what it is, particularly when it is followed by deadly violence. It is ethnic cleansing.

When this issue was last before the House as the subject of an urgent question, I asked the Minister to condemn the Burmese Government, which he is yet to do, for the violence and the flagrant human rights violations. What is he doing to ensure that those who have committed these grave crimes against humanity are brought to justice at The Hague?

3.48 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is hard to put 600,000 people fleeing persecution into context until one has been to the camps and can visualise the thousands of desperate people. To try to put it into some context, however, the situation is roughly the same as if the population of Glasgow or Sheffield were all fleeing the most horrific persecution and violence. On arriving at the camps with my hon. Friends the Members for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and for St Albans (Mrs Main), we saw thousands of people—mainly women and children—thick mud, makeshift tents and shacks as far as the eye could see, terrible sanitary conditions, awful latrines, and makeshift schools. The scenes were horrific.

The Bangladesh Government are absolutely trying their best and, to echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans, I do not think that they could be doing any more. Bangladesh is a relatively poor country with a population of 160 million people. A third of the country is underwater, yet they say, “If we can feed 160 million, we can feed another half a million.”

Sir Hugo Swire: As Bangladesh is a fellow Commonwealth country, does my hon. Friend agree that we should have some kind of Commonwealth response in the light of Bangladesh’s appalling amounts of additional work to feed and provide hospitality to these fleeing people?

Will Quince: My right hon. Friend makes a good suggestion that I hope the Minister takes on.

Bangladesh is doing a great job, but it is under considerable pressure. The movement of people, particularly within the past few months, is on an unimaginable scale—the figure was some 10,000 to 15,000 people just over the past weekend. What camp could cope with such numbers of people desperate for help?

We saw many people and discussed many different stories, most of them absolutely tragic. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans said, we picked the people to whom we spoke; we were not directed. Either this is the biggest conspiracy theory in history, or they are telling the truth, and I choose to believe they are telling the truth.
I want to tell the story of a lady whose house was burned, with her husband killed and son murdered before her eyes. She picked up her remaining children and what possessions she could carry, and walked for five days in the hope that things might be better somewhere else. She got to the camps. As I spoke to her, she held her eight-month-old baby, who looked around four months old because they were so malnourished. She was desperately trying to feed her baby as we spoke, but her malnourished body could not produce the milk to do so. As a father myself, it broke my heart. That story is not a one-off; it was the same with every person to whom we spoke, mostly women who had gone through such a horrific ordeal, and in some cases worse.

We visited a makeshift school in the camps and heard 30 or so children singing “We Will Overcome” in English, because hope is all they have left. I am incredibly proud, as we should all be, of the role that the Department for International Development and the United Kingdom are playing through UK aid. It fills me with pride to see UK aid from the British people used all over the camps. Can we do more? Of course we can.

This is my message to all those who sent me emails and Twitter messages after Prime Minister’s questions last Wednesday to say that we should not be sending UK aid: “You are wrong. This is exactly where we should be sending UK aid.” I am incredibly proud of what we are doing, as everyone in this country should be. Yes, we have to do more through diplomacy and work within the United Nations. I am grateful for the Prime Minister’s response, and I know the Minister has visited the region and is as passionate as me about addressing this issue.

Mrs Gillan: My hon. Friend’s personal visit cannot be repeated by all of us who have read about the situation. Is there anything we can do to get aid more quickly to where it is needed? The speed of response seems to be one of the big problems in helping people on the ground.

Will Quince: There are many ways in which we can help, and I look to the Minister, and to DFID Ministers, to answer that question. The scale of the challenge is the issue. The Bangladeshi Government have recently set aside another 2,000 acres of land for the camps to expand, but they need money. That is why I encourage the Minister to redouble our efforts to make sure that the UN, the humanitarian agencies and the NGOs can work in Myanmar not only to keep people safe, but to protect that all-important humanitarian aid.

I know the Minister is as passionate as I am about this issue, and I am proud of what we are doing. The Rohingya people are desperate to go home, but I just ask him to redouble our efforts to make sure that the UN, the humanitarian agencies and the NGOs can work in Myanmar not only to keep people safe, but to protect that all-important humanitarian aid.

3.55 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and to concur with everything he said in his excellent speech. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), both of whom spoke incredibly powerfully, as has everyone else in this debate.

I am pleased to say that this morning the International Development Committee agreed to carry out an immediate inquiry on Burma and Bangladesh, and to start that inquiry by looking at the current Rohingya crisis. As of this month, more than half a million refugees have fled across the border between the two countries, increasing the number of displaced persons in Bangladesh to about 800,000. To put that number in perspective, UNHCR estimates that the total number of refugees who crossed the Mediterranean into Europe last year was 362,000, so we are talking about more than double that number in the single country of Bangladesh. That is why today’s debate is so important.

As we have heard, while these people—most of them women and children—have been making this perilous journey, they have been traumatised by landmines, gunshots, shrapnel and fires. Those who arrive safely in Bangladesh talk of the appalling violations of human rights that are being carried out in Burma. Let us have no doubt that, as the motion says, we are witnessing ethnic cleansing, and this House needs to say that loud and clear. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) rightly said, this is not something new. The Rohingya people have faced centuries of persecution and have so often been forgotten.

The need in Bangladesh is severe. According to the International Rescue Committee, which has carried out needs assessments in the region, more than three quarters of the refugees surveyed lacked the basic food to live; about a third are being forced to defecate in the open; more than 95% are drinking untreated water; a staggering 87% of the displaced families have at least one member with an identified vulnerability—they may be elderly, pregnant, disabled or wounded—and nearly half of the pregnant women have not received medical care for their pregnancies.

I join in paying tribute to the Government and people of Bangladesh for their remarkable response to this crisis. Humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR have struggled to register new arrivals as they cross the border. The camps that have been set up for the fleeing Rohingya in Bangladesh are often located in low-lying areas that are either flooded or severely prone to flooding during the monsoon season. Although the Bangladesh army is planning to construct new camps for the ever-increasing number of arrivals, the task is made more difficult by the fact that Bangladesh is not a party to the UN convention on refugees, which sometimes means that UN agencies and others have
struggled to gain access to Rohingya refugees inside Bangladesh. Given such a massive humanitarian need, the Government of Bangladesh can show further strong leadership by expediting the registration process of refugees to those NGOs that are ready and willing to help. The IRC is a good example, as it is ready to scale up in a massive way and has just submitted its registration request. May I urge the Minister to indicate in his response today that the Government will use their good offices to seek to persuade the Government of Bangladesh to move on this very important point, as it will enable key NGOs to register refugees so that they get the support that they so desperately need?

3.59 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is important to note the history behind this issue. As we heard earlier from the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), the Rohingya Muslims have been in that part of Myanmar for many hundreds of years. When the British were controlling Burma, they used people from what is now Bangladesh, moving across what was then a very permeable border, for employment and labour. That started to muddy the waters, because we did not register those people or acknowledge them as Bangladeshis. That has given the Myanmar Government the excuse to set a new year zero and to deny these people, who have been there and had roots there for so many years, the right to citizenship.

When I was in Burma in February 2016, at the time of the transition Government, I was really hopeful. Everyone was incredibly optimistic that, as the country came into the light, we would start to see the desperately needed end to the ethnic conflict throughout the country. I ask all Members present, including the Minister, to acknowledge when they condemn what is going on in Rakhine state that the Burmese people are largely behind it, as shocking as that may sound. There are demonstrations in Yangon at which people say, “We stand with the lady, we stand with the army and we stand with the Burmese people.”

Aung San Suu Kyi was speaking at the same time as we were at Cox’s Bazar airport. We have all said that she needs to be far more forthright in condemning the actions in Rakhine state, but we must concentrate on the man who could stop this tomorrow: Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief. If we whip this up into “the west against a nationalist uprising in Myanmar”, we run a risk, because this is a man who might fancy his chances of presidency in 2020. We might end up with the military getting back into control via the ballot box rather than the gun.

Sir Hugo Swire: My hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily powerful point. We should all be familiar with the point that during the transition, the military retained 25% of control in the Myanmar Parliament. The commander-in-chief is no fan of Aung San Suu Kyi, so she is in an extraordinarily difficult position. Yes, we would like her to speak out more, but we must also recognise that in the longer term the progress we have seen in Burma could easily go backwards, and that would endanger peace throughout the country, not only in Rakhine.

Paul Scully: Members in the Chamber and people throughout the country are rightly passionate about the atrocities that are taking place and that were witnessed by a number of us who went over to Cox’s Bazar, but we must realise that the situation in the country is complex. Our response must absolutely reflect that so that we do not make the country close in on itself. If we do, the conflicts in Rakhine state will start to reignite in Kachin state, Shan state and all the other areas in which the peace process, under Kofi Annan’s commission, has started to have some sort of traction—although it is taking some time.

The military claims that what is going on in Rakhine state is a response to the Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army, and that ARSA is a terrorist group. Let us assume that there are some terrorists there, although if there are, they number a couple of hundred at most—nothing like the 500,000 people who have crossed the border. Along with my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for St Albans (Mrs Main), I met a 60-year-old lady. She came over with her surviving grandchildren—and I mean surviving grandchildren. Her son-in-law had been stalked in front of her and dragged away, and was assumed dead, and her 12-year-old grandchild was beheaded in front of her.

Mrs Main: Does my hon. Friend agree that we were given her words absolutely verbatim? They were translated by people in our party who understood, so we were not being duped in any way.

Paul Scully: Absolutely. We picked all of the dozen or so people to whom we spoke over two days and we had our own translators there, so it was absolutely verbatim. Another one of her grandchildren had their genitals mutilated and chopped off. As Members will understand, this woman was dead behind the eyes. There is no way that that woman was a terrorist. The response by the military is clearly disproportionate and needs to be called out. We must absolutely ensure that every time we have dealings with the Burmese Government and the military we call them out for what they do.

We need to plan things regionally, work with our Commonwealth friends, and try to encourage the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to have a regional response. At the moment, there is little movement from Thailand, and the Indian Government are rejecting the Rohingya Muslims who have settled in their country, so, as we have heard, this is not just a Burmese-Bangladeshi situation.

The Bangladeshi Government are doing a fantastic job under difficult circumstances. The fact that the situation is not new is clear when I reveal that the Kutupalong camp is 30 years old. This is not a new camp that has just been set up; it is 30 years old. There are two treaties outstanding with Bangladesh and Burma dating back to 1978 for the safe return of Rohingya Muslims to Burma. They have been ignored by the Burmese Government, so we must ensure that a treaty, which is backed up by international support, is put in place to allow the safe return of the Rohingyas.

4.6 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the hon. Member for St Albans
(Mrs Main) for securing this necessary debate. I also thank my hon. Friend for the vital work that she has done in raising awareness of the persecution of the Rohingya. Sadly this abuse is not new. In 1992, a cross-party early-day motion criticised the “systematic extermination” of the Rohingya in Burma. Some 25 years later, the extermination continues.

The most recent UN report contains witness statements detailing shocking acts of violence and humiliation: children and elderly people burned in their homes; mass use of gang-rape, including soldiers gang-raping girls as young as five; victims, including children, forced to watch relatives and loved ones tortured and killed; and a pregnant woman raped, her stomach cut open, her unborn baby killed, and her nipples cut off.

Since August, more than 540,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, taking the total now in Bangladesh to more than 800,000. Sickeningly, Amnesty International and some of our colleagues have said that there are clear indications that the Burmese authorities have been deliberately targeting the Rohingya as they flee, placing landmines at border crossings.

Paul Scully: Does the hon. Lady agree that landmines are terrible not just for those in the present, but in 10 or 20 years’ time when, hopefully, this has been solved and children are out playing?

Sarah Champion: That is the perversity of the situation, and we have our eyes wide open.

The Secretary of State for International Development has said that children are at risk of “sexual violence and trafficking”. The International Rescue Committee said that there are “reports of girls in Rohingya camps being raped or abused when going to the toilet or collecting firewood.”

There are those who suggest that there are two sides to this story, and that paramilitary attacks mean that the Rohingyas are to blame for the violence. Nothing can ever justify the horrors that innocent Rohingyas are suffering. The UN report contains a witness statement of a 12-year-old Rohingya girl. She told the UN team: “They surrounded our house and started to shoot. It was a situation of panic—they shot my sister in front of me, she was only seven years old. She cried and told me to run. I tried to protect her and care for her, but we had no medical assistance on the hillside and she was bleeding so much that after one day she died. I buried her myself.”

That was a 12-year-old girl. If a proportional response existed, that could never be it. The UN also said that “security forces targeted teachers, the cultural and religious leadership, and other people of influence of the Rohingya community in an effort to diminish Rohingya history, culture and knowledge.”

This is planned and co-ordinated ethnic cleansing. I am pleased and relieved that the Secretary of State has echoed the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in describing it in that way, but we need not only strong language, but strong action. The director of International State Crime Initiative has called ethnic cleansing a “euphemism for genocide”. She adds that genocide is a State Crime Initiative has called ethnic cleansing a “highly organised and genocidal in intent.”

The Bangladeshi Government have already called this genocide so I ask the Minister, if the UN finds that genocide or other violations of international law have been committed, will the British Government support a referral to the International Criminal Court?

Sarah Champion: I am hugely grateful for that intervention.

Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary had the opportunity to lead on this in a meeting of the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council. Sadly, the Foreign Secretary’s eagerness to lead at home is not matched by an eagerness to lead abroad. The only action from that meeting was the suspension of invitations to senior Burmese military officials to visit the EU. I agree with Burma Campaign UK that this is absolutely pathetic.

We must do everything in our power to protect the Rohingya and pressure the Burmese Government to immediately cease military operations. We must ensure the implementation of the recommendations in the Annan commission, particularly on the matter of citizenship rights. We must listen to aid agencies and ensure that resources are available to distribute food, reduce the threat of disease and help establish protection services for women and children. We have to remove the red tape so that that can happen. We must pressure the Burmese authorities to allow immediate unimpeded humanitarian access to Rakhine state. Fundamentally, we must no longer turn a blind eye. I urge this House to act now, before it is too late.

4.11 pm

Fiona Bruce (Con): In an article in The Wall Street Journal in November 2016, Ben Rogers—the vice-chair of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission, which I have the privilege to chair—wrote:

“A human tragedy approaching ethnic cleansing is unfolding in Burma, and the world is chillingly silent. In recent weeks, hundreds of Muslim Rohingya people have been killed, and more than 30,000 displaced. Houses have been burned, hundreds of women raped and many others arbitrarily arrested. Access for humanitarian-aid organizations has been almost completely denied. Thousands have fled to neighboring Bangladesh, only to be sent back. Witness all the hallmarks of past tragedies: Bosnia, Darfur, Kosovo, Rwanda... It’s also time for the international community to speak out. If we fail to act, Rohingyas may starve to death if they aren’t killed by bullets first... Let us act now before it’s too late.”

How right he was. That was almost a year ago. For many, such as the seven-year-old girl we just heard about, buried by her 12-year-old sister, it is already too late.

In a further article in February this year, Ben Rogers and the EU special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, Ján Figel’, highlighted the question of impunity, writing:

“Under the constitution, the military remains in control of the Home Affairs, Border Affairs and Defense ministries, meaning Ms. Suu Kyi’s leadership is tenuous. While she could have done more to speak out, she does not control the troops. Only Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief, has the power to stop the killing and rapes.”
Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I take my hon. Friend’s point about Aung San Suu Kyi, but it is not simply that Aung San Suu Kyi has not condemned the activities of the military; it is that she has actively apologised for them over and over again in interviews. Having gone from being one of the most celebrated people in the world for her courage in taking on the brutal authorities, she has become that brutal authority.

Fiona Bruce: It should be remembered that, yes, she could have done more to prevent this tragedy and to speak out when it began, but she does not control the army.

The article continued:
“The international community must now act to hold the Burmese military to account for its crimes.”

Those warnings were also made many months ago. Now a tragedy is unfolding on a far bigger scale and action is long overdue.

I welcome the action taken by the Government so far: initiating discussions at the UN Security Council, suspending training programmes with the Burmese army, providing £30 million in aid and pledging to match £5 million in donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal.

Paul Scully: Does my hon. Friend agree that, while it is absolutely right that we should suspend our military programme with the Burmese military, it is a matter of regret that the people left training the Burmese military at the moment are the Russians?

Fiona Bruce: I will come in a moment to the further action I want to challenge the Minister to take with regard to the military.

More surely can and should be done. When the United Nations Secretary-General describes the crisis as “catastrophic” and “a devastating humanitarian situation” and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said that it is “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”, there is surely a need for a much more robust response.

So what other measures will the UK take to put pressure on the army and the Government of Burma to stop this appalling ethnic cleansing? What steps are the Government taking to demand that the military in Burma immediately cease operations in Rakhine state and that the Government of Burma allow unhindered access to all affected areas for international humanitarian aid organisations, human rights monitors and the media? What pressure will the Government put on the Government of Burma to ensure that Rohingyaas can safely return to their home villages and that homes are rebuilt, livelihoods are secured, security is guaranteed, the recommendations of the Rakhine advisory commission, chaired by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, are implemented, a reconciliation process begins, and the military are held to account for their crimes?

Will the Government work at the UN Security Council to secure a global arms embargo on Burma and targeted sanctions to prohibit investment in Burmese military-owned enterprises? Will the UK urge the EU to extend its arms embargo to ban the sale of non-military equipment that could be used for military purposes and to impose a visa ban on senior members of the military? Will the UK work to reintroduce a UN General Assembly resolution on Burma, imposing specific measures to put pressure on the Government and the military in Burma to address this crisis?

I urge the Minister to consider introducing regular meetings at this critical time, either with himself or his officials, so that non-governmental organisations based in London that have much expertise in Burma can discuss the current crisis. I have referred to the expertise of Ben Rogers, but I also have in mind the Burma Campaign UK, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and, in particular, representatives of the exiled Rohingya community.

This tragedy requires our urgent attention and action now. It is time to act to prevent another ethnic cleansing from becoming another genocide.

4.17 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I returned from Bangladesh just last week, and I felt moved to speak today. The Rohingya have been forced to choose between the perilous uncertainty of fleeing to another country and the certainty of the violent oppression in their own. The stories of suffering are simply too much to bear. Prior to being in this place, I had a career in the field of humanitarian emergencies, and I have rarely seen anything like this: entire communities fleeing with anything they could grab, only to see all their homes razed to the ground; children burying their younger siblings; multiple accounts of rape and torture; the woman who found her husband dead in her village yet still managed to find the strength over five days to take her three children to Bangladesh; the husband and father who saw his wife and some of his children murdered in front of him but still found the strength to take his remaining children to safety; the two little boys who made it into Bangladesh, despite having had their legs broken; the bravery that is second to none; and, as almost always in conflict, the hundreds—the thousands—of women who have been raped.

Is this ethnic cleansing? Without a doubt. It is a campaign of the most extreme violence, with physical and psychological trauma that will last for generations to come. While it is deeply shocking, it is, sadly, not surprising. We were warned. Three years ago, the group United to End Genocide said:

“Nowhere in the world are there more known precursors to genocide than in Burma today.”

Yet, these things have been allowed to happen. It follows decades of state-supported violent discrimination, social exclusion, and the relentless stoking of racial hatred. The desire to expel the Rohingya from Myanmar has been repeatedly laid bare, as even in the years when the world praised Aung San Suu Kyi’s path to democracy, they were demonised and massacred as “the other.”

I say this to Aung San Suu Kyi: “What we are seeing is not fake news. With its acts of barbaric, unimaginable horror, the campaign of ethnic cleansing taking place in Rakhine province shows the eternal truth that if you cannot see the essential humanity of people because you declare them to be “the other”, you will lose your own humanity.” It is a lesson that this country should learn well. It challenges us to ask, “What does our humanity spur us to do now?” Does it spur us to be brave and to challenge what is happening? Will we act? Will we call this what it is—ethnic cleansing?
The Rohingya desperately need us to step up. They may have escaped the Myanmar army, but they are not yet safe. They are malnourished. They are desperate. Pregnant women are in need of care; children are alone, subject to sexual exploitation. I have worked with, and spoken to on the ground, fantastic organisations such as Christian Aid and Action Aid. They need our help. Bangladesh, which has so bravely and kindly opened its borders, needs our help. We cannot allow the Burmese campaign of ethnic cleansing to succeed by giving up on the future of the people, and of so many children who have been through hell for a chance of survival. I call on the Government to accelerate and increase their support of those organisations and others working to support the Rohingya refugees. At Britain’s best, our humanity does not have borders; it is big enough to stretch overseas. Let it stretch and let us support the Rohingya Muslims who so desperately need our help.

4.21 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this important debate. I hope that as well as getting a further commitment from the Minister to do all that he can to support the Rohingya people, we can get some of the western media to cover their plight, which has been ignored for so long. With more than 1 million minority Rohingya having fled Burma after witnessing murder, rape and pillaging of villages, we should not be afraid to call the actions of the Burmese authorities what they are—a deliberate, brutal, sustained and targeted campaign to cleanse the country of Rohingya and Muslim minority groups. It is a genocide.

The horror and the lack of an international response to the persecution of the Rohingya led the Foreign Affairs Committee to hold its first ever session on this issue last week. Tun Khin of Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK came and gave evidence. He confirmed that more than 10,000 homes have been burned or destroyed. The military are systematically going from village to village, looting and destroying everything. They leave nothing behind: there is nothing for the Rohingya to return to. The United Nations described what took place as crimes against humanity. The UN Human Rights Council established a fact-finding mission to investigate, yet the Government of Burma are refusing to allow it into the country.

The Burmese are applying North Korean public relations strategies and declaring that the reporting of rape, plunder and mass murder is some sort of media hysteria. I have here a letter that the Foreign Affairs Committee received from the embassy, which says:

“Accusations of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘genocide’ are totally false... Assertions in the media that horrifying crimes have been committed against innocent people have only served to intensify the anxiety of the international community. While such claims might appear realistic at initial glance to an ordinary viewer, skilled observers would see otherwise. This letter is diabolical. By having this debate in this Chamber today, we can make it clear to the Burmese authorities that we will call out what we see."

Mrs Main: Does my hon. Friend agree that if they feel they have nothing to hide, they should let the world in?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely.

One slightly positive point was the establishment of the commission chaired by the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. However, while Aung San Suu Kyi was talking about implementing its recommendations, her social media, Facebook page and website were carrying flashing “fake rape” signs. At the same time, the UN was confirming the most horrific details of mass rape of Rohingya women.

Many other valid points have been raised today. I want to read out the testimony of one young woman, who writes to Aung San Suu Kyi:

“After suffering years of abuse at the hands of the military junta, your peace prize inspired us, a people who have suffered decades of oppression. We were proud to call ourselves Myanmarese.”

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more than 500,000 refugees who have fled in recent months to Bangladesh, and about the more than 200,000 who were already there, having fled violence previously.

I have been reflecting on the fact that we have had so many debates in this House about whether we should take a few thousand unaccompanied child refugees into our nation—one of the most prosperous on earth—from the ravaged land that is Syria, while Bangladesh, one of the poorest nations on earth, is housing 800,000 refugees. I do not know that we would be so generous if we faced the situation that the Bangladeshis face. As other Members have said, not only must we offer every assistance to the Bangladeshi Government—I welcome the efforts that have been made already—but we must strain every sinew to provide humanitarian assistance and use our particular expertise to support the Bangladeshi Government as fully as we possibly can, and we must implore the rest of the world to do the same.

Paul Scully: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Shabana Mahmood: I will not, because of the shortness of time; I apologise.

I agree that we should keep a laser-like focus on the military, and I support Members’ calls for arms bans and visa bans for military personnel and their families in Myanmar. I hear the argument about Min Aung Hlaing, the military leader; as others have said, he could stop this overnight. However, I do not want us to get away from the moral responsibility on Aung San Suu Kyi. I take on board the points about the military leadership—I hear the argument saying that she does not have power, that this country is transitioning to democracy, that she has to tread a fine line and that there is a fear of overthrow by the military leadership—but the compromise of transition to democracy cannot come at the cost of turning a blind eye to ethnic cleansing. That is abhorrent, and a total corruption of democracy and everything that democracy stands for.

There is an idea that Aung San Suu Kyi has no power, but for many years not only did she have no power, but she did not have liberty, yet she used the one power she did have—the power of her voice, the power to speak out—and now she has fallen silent and brought her Nobel peace prize into disrepute. If she has not been utterly silent, all she has done is to act as an apologist for the military regime and to deny the truth of the crisis that has fallen upon the Rohingya in Burma.

The point about Aung San Suu Kyi raising her voice is so important because she must stand up and make the argument for democracy. Democracy is not the tyranny of the majority having a vote and persecuting a minority. It is founded on the principle that human rights are universal, and the universality of human rights must be accepted in Myanmar if it is ever going to be a democracy worthy of the name. That is the argument that Aung San Suu Kyi could and should make, and we in this House must call her out. If we, in the mother of Parliaments, do not stand up for the true nature of democracy, I fear all will be lost.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): In effect, there is no debate in this place this afternoon, because we are all of the same voice and of the same opinion, as we know from the words that right hon. and hon. Members have read out by way of testimony from the Rohingyas who have suffered in this dreadful genocide, and from the right hon. and hon. Members who have seen with their own eyes and listened with their own ears to the plight of these people.

As it turns out, the Rohingyas have been persecuted and treated appallingly not just by the Burmese authorities, but sadly, often by many of the Burmese people themselves, and not just for years, but for decades if not centuries. This is a long-standing problem, but it is now of a scale that is absolutely, totally and without any doubt unacceptable. I praise the British Government for being at the forefront in calling out the terrible, terrible persecution of these people, and for the aid that has been provided thus far.

Our hearts do go out to Bangladesh. It is not exactly one of the world’s richest countries, yet the people of Bangladesh have opened their borders, opened their hearts and given of their limited resources to people who are in the most appalling of situations of life and plight. One cannot sit in this place and not have been touched to one’s core by the words of the real testimonies we have heard about this atrocious act of inhumanity, genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Those words are all the right ones to use—they convey right hon. and hon. Members’ passion and emotion—but words are not enough. We now need not only action from our Government, with all that they have done, but for our Government to continue to take this issue to the world across the world in saying to the Burmese authorities that this is not acceptable and we will not tolerate it, and in doing more to put full pressure on the Burmese authorities.

I must say two further things. The first is that I very much join right hon. and hon. Members in the words they have said about Aung San Suu Kyi. She was a woman who I always believed had shown great courage in her overriding humanity, and I am afraid she has let herself down, never mind the Rohingyas. All of us believed so much in what she stood for, and I gravely fear that she has put her own position in the history of our world at peril. How can I argue against those who are calling for her peace prize to be removed from her?

My other point is that when the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and I went to the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, we saw people who had been there for four or five years, and she told me about her work in Palestinian refugee camps and about the people who have been there for 15 or 20 years. It worries me that these people, like all refugees, can go home.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The right hon. Lady mentioned refugee camps in different parts of the world. What is happening to the Rohingyas is horrendous, given the testimony that we have heard today. In common with many past disasters, is it not absolutely vital that there is access for agencies so that they can go in and gather evidence and testimony, so that the case can be made and the people responsible for perpetrating the atrocities are brought to justice in the international courts?
Anna Soubry: I agree with everything that the hon. Lady said. I am absolutely sure that all those things will be done. As the Minister explained, the Government have not stood back on any of that. In fact, they want to step up and assist. Somehow, somewhere along the line, it has to be more than words and the sticking-plaster that refugee camps can almost become. We do wonderful things through our great aid agencies and DFID. We are proud as a country that we provide aid in that way, but we have not stood back on any of that. In fact, they want to step up and assist. Somehow, somewhere along the line, it has to be more than words and the sticking-plaster that refugee camps can almost become. We do wonderful things through our great aid agencies and DFID. We are proud as a country that we provide aid in that way.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): May I begin by conveying to the House the extensive number of responses that I have received from my constituents and others about the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar? I have been contacted by people involved in fundraising efforts and grassroots protests, which provide an outlet for their outrage and dismay. Like many hon. Members who have spoken, I have done whatever I can to provide support, particularly by raising funds for refugees in Bangladesh, but we can all do more.

Let us be direct: what we are witnessing is ethnic cleansing. More than half the Rohingya population has fled. Starvation is a new tool that is being used to drive the Rohingya from their homes, in addition to the burning of villages, looting, and the mass use of gang rape, including of young girls and pregnant women. The recent violence is the result of decades of persecution. I would like to make three short points. First, we should not restrict our criticism to the Burmese military. Aung San Suu Kyi has been a symbol of democracy, the rule of law, and resistance to oppressive regimes for decades, but she has disappointed us all. Not only has she failed to speak out, but she has denied that this is happening. I agree with many of my hon. Friends who have asked for her Nobel prize to be revoked. Supporting freedom and democracy in Myanmar is a laudable aim, but it means nothing if we ignore ethnic cleansing.

Secondly, the Government need to spell out what concrete action they will take to end the persecution of the Rohingya beyond ending the training of Burmese armed forces. At a recent Security Council meeting, the UK’s ambassador to the UN set out five ways in which the Myanmar Government should resolve the crisis. What steps have the Government taken to encourage them to comply? We should look at what economic sanctions the global community could exert to put further pressure on Myanmar and end the violence.

Finally, I would like to raise the issue of sexual violence. The coalition Government drew international headlines with the global summit to end sexual violence in conflict that they arranged in 2014. In response to a written question that I submitted, the Government said that they had urged Myanmar to accept a visit by a Human Rights Council fact-finding mission to investigate allegations of sexual violence. That mission was announced months ago—in March. What additional pressure have the UK Government exerted on Myanmar in response to the recent escalation of violence in Rakhine? We cannot afford accusations of peddling empty words; these issues are too serious to be cheapened by rhetoric.

4.39 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Some years ago, I secured a Westminster Hall debate in which I said to the Government that although we had been told that there had been a transition to democracy in Burma, its military and junta were still carrying out rapes, murders, systematic discrimination and persecution against the Rohingya people. I said then that we should not have lifted sanctions and been supplying arms to Burma; we should have waited until the Myanmar Government started treating people—especially the Rohingya people—fairly. Sanctions should not have been lifted, and development funds and military assistance should not have been given.

I am afraid that the Government did not listen. Nobody paid any attention. Unlike some Members, I do not accept that the Government have done enough. This issue has been pointed out for a number of years and nothing has happened. After we came back from the recess in September, I raised an urgent question about the current crisis, and I was very disappointed when the Minister for Asia and the Pacific effectively said that what had happened was the fault of the Rohingya. At that time, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty reports showed satellite images of Rohingya villages being systematically burned. Even at that point, more than 100,000 Rohingya people had fled as refugees into Bangladesh. I am afraid that the ministerial response was not good. Madam Deputy Speaker, you are looking a little puzzled, but I can refer in Hansard to the Minister’s suggestion.

Mark Field: This is a very serious issue. It is fair to say that the latest element of the crisis, triggered on 25 August, came about when the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army killed a dozen of the security forces. At that time, I made it very clear how massive was the overreaction of the security forces. However, it is also worth pointing out that at the UN, as I shall discuss in my speech, the President of Turkey and Head of State of Malaysia also made the point that this latest element of the crisis had been triggered by ARSA, a paramilitary group.

Yasmin Qureshi: But there has been systematic abuse of the Rohingya people for years. The fact is that Governments around the world—not just ours—and also the UN have been approached about this issue, but nobody has taken any notice.

More recently, things have gone to the extreme. More than half a million people are now in Bangladesh. The situation in Myanmar is such that those people will not be able to come back. We have heard real, cogent evidence of children being raped and murdered in front of their mothers’ eyes. I do not know what proof the world needs that genocide and ethnic cleansing are taking place right now. I am afraid that the international community seems not to have done enough, if anything, to deal with the issue.

It is all very well people saying, “We’ll give you more money,” or, “We’re going to provide money for the people in Bangladesh,” but that is not enough. Loads more money is needed, but the Rohingya people still in Burma
now need to be looked after, and what is happening to them needs to be stopped. The powerful nations of the world need to get together and tell the Burmese to stop. Only when they do so will the Burmese actually do that.

I remember the Libya debate in this House. There were fears then that people might get killed. The world came together: we were able to get a UN Security Council resolution and bomb the place. I am not necessarily saying that we should start bombing, but there seems to be a complete lack of action compared with what happened in Libya, although the Foreign Affairs Committee found that the threat there had perhaps not been as imminent as everybody had suggested. Over there, we did not even know who the good guys and the bad guys were; in Burma, it is clear who is carrying out the ethnic cleansing: the Myanmar Government, the army and the military junta. One general clearly said, “This is a unfinished business,” so we know what they want. They want to prevent the Rohingya from going back to Burma, where they belong and have lived for centuries.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that because actions speak louder than words, we need to do more now? This has been going on for years, yet we sit back and do nothing, which is the opposite of what we should be doing. Does she agree we should do more now, make a stand, and do all we can to stop this genocide?

Yasmin Qureshi: I agree entirely, which was why I said at the start of my speech something that I think no one else has said today. I said, with respect, that our Government have not done enough. We saw what we could achieve when we invaded Iraq and when we intervened in Libya, and I am not even asking for military intervention. We could do more to stop the situation in Burma. Myanmar is not a rich country. I refuse to believe that if members of the international community put their heads together they could not stop what is happening—the ethnic cleansing, systematic genocide and rape.

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady talks about doing more but says she is not asking for military intervention. What would she like us to do rather than say?

Yasmin Qureshi: Years ago, when I raised this matter in Westminster Hall, I said that the sanctions should be maintained, that military assistance should be stopped, and that the sale of weapons from across the world to Burma should be stopped. People need to get together and talk. I do not believe for one minute that if the richest countries in the world said to the Burmese generals, “Stop doing this,” they would not stop doing it—they would. If all the money and military aid was pulled out, they would stop. I am sorry to say, however, that the international community is still sitting and watching while genocide and ethnic cleansing take place.

4.47 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate, and I am grateful to be called to make a brief contribution, acknowledging the disaster befalling the Rohingya people, described as ethnic cleansing by the UN.

I endorse many of the comments that colleagues have made this afternoon in their many passionate contributions. I pay tribute to the Government for what they have done so far to help the international aid effort, and I look forward to the Minister updating us on the latest from UK Aid Direct when he winds up. I commend the Disasters Emergency Committee for its efforts to raise awareness and funds to combat the human tragedy that continues to unfold, and I praise the efforts of the Bangladeshi Government, as have many others, to help the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have descended on their territory. I also want to mention the efforts of two small UK-Bangladeshi charities, the Sreepur Village orphanage, of which I am a patron, and Shishu Polli Plus. Our founder, Pat Kerr, has collected clothes from the garment factories around Gazipur and taken them to Cox’s Bazar to do what she can to help. I am sure that her efforts are replicated by many small likeminded charities, but it is a drop in the ocean compared with the atrocities and the disaster we have heard about this afternoon.

I attended a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development last month when it was addressed by Achim Steiner, the new head of the UN Development Programme. When asked about the situation in Myanmar, he described it as “democracy hanging by a thread”. That thread, in my view, is Aung San Suu Kyi. The Lady has been under house arrest or arrest for 15 of the last 21 years, her country has been a democracy for only 18 months, and my understanding is that the military, under a constitution that it drafted, is guaranteed 25% of the places in both legislative houses and therefore has an effective veto in Parliament over every major decision, since every such decision requires a 76% majority to pass. The military controls Parliament and the forces, so it is the military that is carrying out the atrocities. In addition to that, as other Members have said, the atrocities are replicated by many small charities, but it is a drop in the ocean compared with the atrocities.

In addition to that, there are allegations of corruption at the highest level of the military, negative influence from foreign interests trying to exploit Myanmar’s natural resources, and armed movements in regions such as Shan and Kachin—which were mentioned earlier—show that the challenges to the country’s fledgling democratic status are huge.

I would be grateful if the Minister told us what we are doing to encourage Aung San Suu Kyi to live up to the promises that she made in her speech in the capital, Nay Pyi Taw, on 19 September. She did not go anywhere near as far as all of us would have wanted, and I share the disappointment, confusion and frustration that her words have caused, but what are we doing to press her on the invitations that she did issue to the international community to attend, assist, observe and pronounce on her and her Government’s efforts?

I should be grateful for the Minister’s reassurance, for the Rohingya victims and also for Myanmar’s democracy. If democracy—with all the attendant respect for human rights for every citizen—does not prevail, the atrocities suffered by the Rohingya for so many centuries will continue.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this important debate—although, as other Members have said, it is not really a debate, because most of us agree. We are all horrified.
We have heard the details of atrocities for weeks in the House, and none of us can have failed to be shocked by the child beheadings, the rape, the murder and the burning of homes—the ruthless targeting of innocent civilians.

The recent outbreak of violence against the Rohingya people began on 25 August, nearly eight weeks ago. I want to know—and Members in all parts of the House are asking this question, as are my constituents—what the British Government have done in the meantime. I applaud the efforts that we have heard about today, but do they go far enough? My constituents want to see an end to the military action that the Rohingya are still facing in Myanmar. They want to see the naming and shaming of the military leader. They want to be sure that humanitarian aid is reaching the people in Myanmar and the camps in Bangladesh.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that access to Myanmar is crucial, and we must ensure that the United Nations and non-governmental organisations have access to those who are left there in a vulnerable state, living and enduring this nightmare?

Julie Cooper: Absolutely, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point.

My constituents and I—and, I am sure, many Members on both sides of the House—want to see the British Government lead not just in respect of the naming and shaming of the military and on humanitarian aid, but in the long term, when the current crisis has calmed down, in respect of a permanent solution that will implement the recommendations of the Rakhine commission. That is vital. Points have already been made about the British Government’s taking a lead, and I would say, “So we should.” We have a moral obligation: our history dictates that ours should be the loudest voice in the world on this issue. We should not be content to leave it to the United Nations or the European Union.

There is a strong perception that we have still not done enough, and that more must be done. Indeed, nearly eight weeks on, not much has been done, and Burma Campaign UK is very critical of our lack of action. I know that we may have gone further than it is suggested, but we have not gone far enough, and we must do more. I want ours to be the loudest voice. I hope the Minister will confirm that when we have delivered the humanitarian aid, when we have stopped the violence and when we have taken the honours from Aung San Suu Kyi, we will lead in securing a permanent, peaceful settlement for democracy and the rights of everyone in Myanmar, particularly the Rohingya Muslims.

4.54 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I join others in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this important and impassioned debate. I pay tribute, too, to all those who have contributed to the debate, particularly those who visited the area recently and have given their accounts in graphic detail: that has greatly helped to ensure that the debate be taken more seriously.

The Rohingya Muslim population in Myanmar has faced persecution for decades. They have been marginalised and victimised, and have had their rights withdrawn by a Government who do not recognise their ethnicity, their language or their customs, and who have sought, through different ways and means, to oust them from land the Rohingya have occupied for centuries.

The disproportionate and overblown retaliation by the Myanmar military, which began on 25 August following the violence by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, which left 12 police officers dead, has now been publicly declared by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing, and we have already heard some of the reasons why.

The Myanmar military and its civil Government led by the now disgraced Aung San Suu Kyi have refused to allow humanitarian agencies to enter the country to inspect the situation. If I may digress, I would like to point out that Sheffield has already taken steps to remove the freedom of the city award from Aung San Suu Kyi over her silence on the violence that has unfolded, and I hope that the Nobel Committee will also review and reconsider revoking her peace prize.

The reports of systematic human rights abuses are harrowing, and no doubt we have also seen the shocking images broadcast of the Rohingya fleeing their homes and livelihoods. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reports that the Myanmar military forces, often accompanied by individual Rakhine Buddhist villagers, have surrounded entire Rohingya villages, firing indiscriminately at villagers, setting houses and land on fire, and threatening villagers nearby that if they do not flee the same will happen to them, with the effect of both expelling Rohingya from Myanmar and giving them no option of return. These actions were, as the report notes, “executed in a well-organized, coordinated and systematic manner”.

The same report gives first-person accounts of young and teenage girls having suffered sexual violence, a tactic we see too often in war and conflict. In one account quoted by the report a 25-year-old woman recounts the moment she heard her sister being raped, saying that four men “in uniform took my sister when we were hiding in the hills; they raped her in front of us as we were hiding behind the trees.”

Over 500,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, and they tell similar stories of destruction, killings and sexual violence. What we are witnessing, after proclaiming “Never again” so many times before, is surely “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.

This is all happening in the view of all of us and the international community.

I urge the Government to explore what more they can do to support the efforts to tackle the humanitarian crisis and to continue to lead the international pressure to address the root causes of the crisis: the policies of the Myanmar Government and the actions of the Myanmar military.

4.59 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing this timely debate. With the world sitting and watching the events unfold in Burma with fear and trepidation, we need to bring the Rohingya people some hope—some hope that we can
help them find a solution, some hope that one day they can return to what is left of their homes as real citizens of a country they are very much a part of.

Many of my colleagues have talked movingly about the systematic rape, murder, pillaging and burning of villages. Human Rights Watch says that as of this week almost 214 villages have been destroyed. We have heard accounts and seen videos of children and the elderly being burnt in their homes, of mass rapes and murders, and the forcing of the Rohingya people from their country.

The numbers, the methods and the actions show a clear and systematic intent, and it is essential that we continue to repeat UN human rights chief Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein’s description of the Government operations in northern Rakhine state as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.

Is it acceptable for the Burmese Government to defend the actions of their military and militias while systematically carrying out the eradication and removal of a people, and for them to escape proper censure from the British Government?

Yesterday I welcomed a Bangladeshi human rights activist, Mokon Miah, to Bradford. He told me of the pressures that Bangladesh is facing in dealing with this crisis. The country faces its own challenges, as the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) succinctly outlined earlier. We need to support not only the Rohingya but Bangladesh and the work that it is doing.

Only two weeks ago, I was approached by a delegation from the British Rohingya community, whose UK headquarters are based in my constituency of Bradford West. They are currently in Bangladesh supporting refugees. My office has worked closely with the Rohingya diaspora community in Bradford, including individuals who have lost members of their direct family in violence in Burma. We must come together and find a way of ending this violence. We know that the distribution and routes of aid within Burma are still difficult and that the Government there are still blocking access, which is despicable. They have already taken so much; now they are leaving people to starve to death. What progress has been made on providing aid within the Rakhine state?

The persecution of the Rohingya is sadly nothing new, as many Members have said today, but maybe this is the time—if our Government can be stronger and if the institutions can show some strength and protect people globally—for us to find a way to help to change these people’s future. The eyes of the world are on the situation in Burma, and the generosity of the British people in giving to the relief effort demonstrates the global will to eradicate this form of evil from our world.

The persecution of the Rohingya people has been allowed to continue for decades. Indeed, the UN has referred to the situation in Rakhine state as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”, and yet the international community has stood back and watched as the Rohingya people have suffered at the hands of the Burmese authorities. This most recent outbreak of violence is the most aggressive that we have seen in recent years, and we cannot remain silent. I am sure that many Members will have seen the harrowing reports from those who have escaped from Rakhine state, and we have heard many horrific stories in the debate today. We have heard reports of elderly people being burned alive in their homes; of innocent civilians being shot as they tried to flee; of girls as young as five being sexually assaulted by soldiers; and of expectant mothers giving birth on the hillsides as they made the journey to Bangladesh. The levels of suffering and brutality that these people are facing cannot be imagined by the majority of us here today.

It is unbelievable that that has been allowed to happen in the 21st century, yet it has become a daily reality for the Rohingya, over half a million of whom have been forced to flee to Bangladesh after being driven from their homes by violence, fear and starvation. The situation is becoming increasingly dire in Bangladesh, where close to 70% of refugees are without adequate shelter and half have no safe drinking water. The efforts of the Bangladeshi authorities and the aid agencies simply cannot be sustained without more support. The international community must do more.

This truly distressing situation has inspired many to take action to support the Rohingya, and I want to take this opportunity to commend the work of two of my constituents. Mohammed Abubakar Ahmed and Mohamed Amir Siddiq exceeded their initial target of £6,000, raising over £30,000 to help the Rohingya. They are travelling to Bangladesh entirely at their own expense to support the refugees in any way they can. That is just one example, but I know that it is being repeated across the UK.

**Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab):** Before the recess, I handed in a petition on behalf of my constituents, and I have received several emails since then requesting that I ask the Government to do more. They have suspended the training of Burmese military, but that is not enough. A constituent of mine also pointed out that the media were slow to pick up on the
situation, so I want the Government and everyone else to note that the media should have started reporting a lot sooner.

Faisal Rashid: I totally agree that the media have a great responsibility to raise awareness of the issue.

It is now the Government’s turn. Will the Minister commit today to take further action, such as imposing travel bans and freezing assets, to ensure that the civilian and military authorities in Myanmar put a complete end to any further violence? Will he commit to providing financial aid directly to the Rohingya through non-governmental organisations to ensure that adequate resources are available to meet the needs of the refugees who have been forced to flee their homes? Will he also ensure that the British Government take action so that those responsible for these horrific crimes are held accountable for their actions? In the face of systematic persecution, we have a duty to humanity and to the Rohingya people to speak up and take action. We must fulfil that duty.

5.7 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): For the purposes of this debate, I declare that the Prime Minister of Bangladesh is my aunt.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this important debate. As everyone has said, the situation is not a recent phenomenon. Myanmar’s history shows that the systematic oppression and ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya has been going on for decades.

I hope that Members will allow me to speak about the experiences of my mother, who visited the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh last month. The UN states that, as of 5 October, half a million Rohingya are living in those refugee camps, and the stories that my mother told me are harrowing. She spoke about a woman whose baby was ripped from her bosom and thrown into a fire by military personnel. Another woman told her how a toddler was snatched away from its parents, put on the ground and stamped to death by the military. Young children have been raped in front of their elderly grandparents. There has been systematic abuse and gender-based violence against the Rohingya.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What my hon. Friend and other colleagues have recounted is horrifying. Does she agree that, in addition to physical humanitarian aid, we urgently need to get psychological and psychotherapeutic support into Bangladesh to help the people who have suffered such appalling horrors?

Tulip Siddiq: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. My mother described the women and children. Women are the largest group in the refugee camps, and they are dead behind the eyes.

My mother is not a stranger to suffering. She fought in Bangladesh’s independence war in 1971, in which 3 million people were killed—it is called a genocide. She said that what she saw in the refugee camps has all the hallmarks of a genocide. It has been going on for so long, but the acceleration of violence in recent months means that the world has finally woken up to what is happening in Myanmar and to the fate of the Rohingya.

What can the Government do? I implore them to do a few things. First, they should push Myanmar to allow these people, who desperately need it, to access humanitarian aid. They should build on the sanctions already in place at EU level. They should ensure that we cut all links with businesses and investors that have anything to do with the military in Myanmar. They should join the UN’s global arms embargo.

On a lighter note, I am often asked the Norman Tebbit test. I always support the underdog because I am a socialist, so in cricket I always support England. I am proud of what Bangladesh has done. As hon. Members know, Bangladesh is a very poor country. Having lived and been to school in Bangladesh, I know there is enormous poverty in that country. Bangladesh has opened its doors and accepted people who are so vulnerable, and I call on the Government to support Bangladesh because it cannot handle the sheer numbers of Rohingyas who are crossing the border. Those people are desperate to live, but they do not have the means and resources to go on.

Mrs Main: Is the hon. Lady aware that the delegation the Burmese sent into the camps said, “I see no Rohingya.” They do not recognise that the Rohingya even exist, which is the problem. The Rohingya are stateless and nobody recognises them.

Tulip Siddiq: The hon. Lady has done an enormous amount of work both in the Rohingya camps and, more generally, in chairing the all-party parliamentary group on Bangladesh. The situation is so disgraceful because this is not fake news; it is real human suffering. I will be going to the Rohingya camps in December, but I do not need to go there to know what is happening on the ground. We need to speak up for the most vulnerable people in the world right now.

My mother told me there are women in the camps who wait and look over the sea desperately hoping that their men will join them soon. They have not let go of that element of hope, but all they see are the dead bodies of people who have tried to cross to safety—the journey is too dangerous. Urgent help is needed.

Returning to the Norman Tebbit test, I am proud of Bangladesh, but I would like my Government, the British Government, to help it to ensure we stop this ethnic cleansing and genocide so that people point to my country, England, where I am an MP, and say, “They are the people who helped to stop this crisis.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes. If there are interventions, some people will not be able to speak at all.

5.12 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), who is no longer in her place, for enabling us as parliamentarians to bear witness to this atrocity and to hear extremely powerful speeches from Members on both sides of the House, but sadly, speeches are not enough.

Anyone who heard the testimony a few days ago of the mum whose young daughter’s hand slipped out of hers in the raging sea as they tried to reach the sanctuary
of Bangladesh on a boat that was barely seaworthy, or who heard the young son who carried his skeletal, disabled mum, barely alive, talk about how he watched the soldiers burn his village—he is unsure where the rest of his family have ended up—or who heard about the three children and their mum who were trampled to death by wild elephants as they slept, having been forced to build their temporary shelter on elephant walkways owing to the unprecedented numbers of refugees huddled in the forested hills of Balukhali, cannot fail to be heartbroken.

These are people—people like all of us in this Chamber. They are women and children, exhausted, injured and traumatised after walking for days. More than half of all new arrivals are children, and one in 10 is a breastfeeding mother. They are human beings who deserve to live in peace. We cannot stand by; we must call it out. The scale of suffering is unimaginable. Over half a million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. They are destitute, scared and hungry. But the Myanmar Government refuse to accept what the world knows to be true: we are witnessing ethnic cleansing. Farah Kabir from ActionAid has said:

"In nearly 15 years of working on humanitarian disasters I’ve never seen a crisis on this scale. The scale of need is far outweighing the response."

If anyone saw the recent posting on Twitter of a drone flying over the refugee camp in Bangladesh, they would have seen that the conditions for those who do manage to escape are barely fit for animals, let alone human beings.

Yet it seems as though the world is holding the coat of the oppressor, standing by, wincing when it is all too much, but doing nothing to protect the victims. We need political will. We need to pressure the EU to support a UN-mandated global arms embargo. Yesterday, EU representatives met to discuss the crisis and issued a joint statement suspending invitations to military leaders, reviewing defence co-operation with Myanmar in the light of the disproportionate use of force against the Rohingya minority—

Paul Scully rose—

Tracy Brabin: I will keep going. The EU had also placed an embargo on weapons and equipment. That is all good, but it is not enough. We need to ban new investment in and business relationships with military-owned companies and members of the military and their families. We need to reinstate the annual General Assembly resolution on human rights in Myanmar. The international community, including the European Union, has failed the Rohingya, and hundreds of thousands of people, many of them children, have paid the price. To do nothing is unacceptable. To speak without taking action is unacceptable. It is time to have courage to do the right thing. The Rohingya are counting on us because we are all they have got.

5.18 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this incredibly important debate and for all the work she has been doing to ensure that the Rohingya have their voices heard. I thank her and all the other hon. Members for their powerful speeches this afternoon, calling out ethnic cleansing for what it is. I am not going to repeat the catalogue of horrors that others have documented so clearly in all their terribleness, but I do want to say how important it is that this place is speaking out so powerfully. It is shameful that we have not heard that same level of urgency and outrage from our Government. It matters because people throughout the country and further afield are watching, and they do notice what we say and do not say. They cannot understand why there has not been greater condemnation, and not only from here in the UK; we heard from the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) what happened at the EU meeting yesterday, with those present failing even to use the words “ethnic cleansing”.

The repercussions of this conflict and the lack of response to it go right around communities far from Myanmar. I recently had a meeting in my constituency who have suffered and these human stories has been touching; there were points during the debate when I could barely keep composure. In some ways, that is what makes me proud of this Parliament and proud to be British—the fact that our values drive our decisions, and that we do not allow inhumanity to take place and stand aside as though it had nothing to do with us.

I am proud of the contribution my constituents have made. I attended an event in Coldhurst where people were fundraising and I know the mosque community has raised tens of thousands of pounds for the refugees. But in many ways what people really want is for the end to be in sight, and it feels as though that is so far away. The plight of people who are fleeing will continue, as will the uncertainty about whether they have a homeland to go back to at all. Even if they do, what is there to go back to? Their homes have been torched and there is no infrastructure. Even before this—35 years before—they were denied their citizenship. They were denied education, the right to free movement and the right even to hold government jobs. This community has been persecuted for a long time, while the international community has stood by and allowed it to happen because this is not quite important enough to be on the agenda.

The time has come for us to have the courage of our convictions, to stand up for the values we stand for as a country, and to say that we will not stand by and allow ethnic cleansing—genocide—to take place on our watch. We do have a historical legacy there and we cannot deny that, and it is right that we put that right. If people in Britain question why the UK Parliament is discussing an issue in a land far away, as some have said online and on social media, let me say this: bring this back home and consider what it would be like if it was your daughter who had been raped when she was five years old, your son who had been killed when he was 12 years old or your father who had been burned to death in the house you once lived in. Just imagine if you were in that situation. What would you want to do? You would hope to God that there was somebody in another land who was willing to step up and do the right thing to save them, wouldn’t you?
with the Brighton & Hove Muslim Forum, at which community members powerfully expressed their shock at the senseless nature of the atrocities that are being committed. They also shared their deep concern that inaction from international leaders and the relative silence on matters that affect the Muslim diaspora have the potential to isolate Muslim communities here at home. The danger of inaction is not only yet more terrible suffering overseas, but the potential for greater radicalisation here at home. Young people are asking why the mass-scale scorched-earth campaigns, the blocking of access for humanitarian organisations, the deep concerns about the repatriation of refugees and the need for EU action are not getting more attention. Community leaders in my constituency warn of the risk that young people’s anger and sense of injustice might make them even more susceptible to being recruited to go over there and fight. We must act on this appalling human injustice, not only because such terrible atrocities are being committed, as we have all heard this afternoon, but because in so doing we will be able to demonstrate to our Muslim communities and young people that we in Parliament share their outrage at this appalling crime against humanity.

There is so much more to be done. In the 20 seconds remaining to me, I simply wish to add my name to those of all the people who have called for much greater action from Governments. They have called for support for a UN-mandated global arms embargo, for humanitarian aid access, for the revival of the UN General Assembly resolution on human rights in Burma, for visa bans on military personnel, and for the military to stand trial for the crimes against humanity that they have committed.

5.21 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I shall break with the conventions of the House by not repeating what has already been said by other Members. In the limited time I have on the clock, I wish instead to focus on what additional things need to be done in response to the most unspokable ongoing atrocities affecting the Rohingya in Myanmar.

What discussions has the Minister had with the military and civilian authorities in Myanmar about improving humanitarian access to northern Rakhine and the other parts of the state that are currently inaccessible to NGOs? The Government have faced criticism for not being as strident as they might have been in their criticism of the Myanmar Government. I wonder whether that has borne some diplomatic fruit, but I have certainly recognised that the Government’s language has strengthened as we have seen a lack of progress from the Myanmar Government.

We must consider the question of regional leadership, and particularly China and India’s roles in influencing the Myanmar Government. Will the Minister say something about that?

Members from all parties have rightly commended the Government of Bangladesh. The humanitarian response of one of the poorest countries in the world really ought to make this country—one of the richest in the world—blush when we think of debates in this Chamber about our response to refugee crises on our own shores. What discussions has the Minister had with his counterparts in EU member states and other countries around the world about how they can support the Government of Bangladesh? Money is of course important but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said, there is also a need for psychological support and other capacity building to support the Government of Bangladesh.

What conversations has the Minister had with his counterparts in Bangladesh about the registration of refugees, and particularly about the risk that some refugees might be treated unfavourably, depending on the route they found themselves taking across the border?

The International Organisation for Migration has been tasked with leading the response co-ordination so far, which has of course been welcome, but is it not now time for the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs to step up to ensure better co-ordination, particularly bearing in mind the upcoming conference in just over a week?

On operational space and planning, accommodation is understandably trumping other services, including nutrition stabilisation. What more can we do to support the Government of Bangladesh to make sure that sufficient space is available for such critical services? People have praised the Government of Bangladesh, but there have been some issues with how the Bangladeshi military is confining people to the camps. What support and training can be provided on that?

5.24 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Let me add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing this debate. On behalf of many of us, may I say to her and to the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince), for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and for St Albans (Mrs Main) that the debt that we owe to them for the courage with which they have borne witness and given testimony this afternoon is really very significant? The level of violence that they have described has sent a very clear signal to all Members that what we are watching in Myanmar today is the creation of a new dark heart in Asia.

The incalculable violence is simply the prelude to what is a strategy of scorched earth, with the destruction of hundreds of villages, the landmines across the border, and the destruction of cultural and religious institutions. What Members have described this afternoon is certainly ethnic cleansing and certainly war crimes. It is a level of barbarism that we have seen in places such as Rwanda and Bosnia, and we have to say very clearly this afternoon that that will not go unpunished.

The message that we send from the House this afternoon is that we will not look away. We will ensure that justice is delivered and that, whenever we can, we will see the leaders of these atrocities in The Hague on trial for war crimes.

All totalitarian regimes down the ages have traded on delusion, fear and silence. We are not under any illusions in this House. We are not afraid and we will not look away until justice is finally done. We will not tolerate this and we will certainly not appease it. We are our own empire, thank God, but we have a moral responsibility. We are, thank God, still members of the EU. We still have membership of the UN Security Council. We are still a leader of the Commonwealth.

This House expects the Government to use every instrument at their disposal to mobilise the international community around the aims set out in this debate. We
must be unflinching in our determination to see justice. I hope that the Minister will be able to set out clearly why we should not see an EU ban on arms sales and new investment. Why would we not expand the visa ban on military personnel and others of interest? Why would we not see an end to all EU co-operation around training for senior personnel in Myanmar, and why would we not reinstate the annual General Assembly resolution on human rights in Myanmar? The arc of history is long and it does bend towards justice, but we do not have forever. We need to end this injustice now.

5.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, although this is not an easy subject to talk about. Some of the experiences that we have heard about today are heartrending and bring tears to our eyes. I have spoken about this topic before, and am happy to speak on it again and to say very clearly that this persecution must be brought to an end as a matter of urgency.

Some years ago, I watched the film “The King and I”, in which the King of Burma sent a slave as a gift. That was make-believe, although perhaps it was partly from history, but now it is a reality that takes place every day for many thousands of people. The Rohingya have been denied identification cards, all freedom of religious practice, and access to employment and most social services.

The UN Secretary General and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have described the violence as “textbook ethnic cleansing”. Myanmar has received billions of dollars in aid since 2011, but has now prohibited aid organisations from delivering lifesaving food and humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya Muslim population. Can the Minister tell us what has been done to address that issue of getting aid through to the people who need it the most? As other Members have said, the Bangladeshi Government have stepped up to provide limited humanitarian aid to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, and some 30 NGOs have been cleared to operate in the region since September. I am worried that Bangladesh still has plans to forcibly relocate Rohingya refugees to Thengar Char, an uninhabited, undeveloped coastal island that is often flooded and submerged during monsoon season.

Christian minorities in Myanmar, such as the Kachin, Chin and Naga peoples, have also been persecuted by the state. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, there have been incidents of intimidation and violence against Christians, the forced relocation and destruction of Christian cemeteries, violent attacks on places of worship, sexual violence in church compounds, torture, and an ongoing campaign of coerced conversion to Buddhism. To date, approximately 120,000 Christians out of that massive number of 800,000 refugees have been forced to flee their homes.

There is concern among some NGOs that although Bangladesh has been more hospitable to Rohingya refugees since the most recent wave of violence, that policy could change. I ask the Minister for a commitment to financial assistance for Bangladesh to ensure that it can continue. The Minister is a compassionate man and a man of feeling who understands the issues—I mean that genuinely and sincerely—so will he call for the Myanmar Government to review or repeal the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law to grant the Rohingya their citizenship rights? If that happens, they could have some hope that they might someday return. What more can be done and would the Foreign and Commonwealth Office be prepared to do it?

This House stands with the voiceless. We stand for and alongside those who have been tortured, and who have suffered pain and violence.

5.31 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): The latest data show that 164,000 people born in Bangladesh held British nationality in December last year. In addition, there are many tens of thousands of British citizens who were born in this country, but whose parents were born in Bangladesh. This country has strong family ties with Bangladesh, and we all benefit from sharing, both economically and culturally.

The Bengali community in Ipswich is seriously concerned about the plight of the Rohingyas. Bangladesh itself went through a period of oppression, with thousands of refugees created there before that nation’s independence, so the people of Bangladesh and the Bengali people here in the United Kingdom understand the ordeal that the Rohingyas are suffering. I am glad to be able to say that non-Bengali residents in Ipswich are also joining in the campaign to assist the refugees, in solidarity with their Bengali neighbours.

More than half a million Rohingyas have fled across the border to Bangladesh in the past couple of months. That is a cautious estimate, as the number is probably now well over 800,000. This number is the same as or greater than the total immigration of non-UK nationals to this country in the whole of last year yet, according to the International Monetary Fund, the GDP per head in Bangladesh for 2016 was just £2,700 in purchasing power parity terms. For the UK, the figure was £29,300—more than 10 times as much.

It is often said that the poorest countries are the most generous, and it is certainly the case that the Rohingyas who have managed to reach Bangladesh have found a ready welcome, and real sympathy and support, but we cannot stand by watching this humanitarian crisis unfold and expect Bangladeshi people to be able to deal with it on their own. Private individuals do a lot. I am pleased to hear about the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) who have raised so much money, and I fully intend to work with the residents of Ipswich to do the same, because they care, but I call on our Government to do more to support the Rohingyas in Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi Government, who are faced with this humanitarian crisis in their midst and really are not able to cope on their own.

5.33 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on organising and leading such an important debate.

More than half a million people—mostly Rohingya women and children—have fled violence in Rakhine state, seeking refuge in Bangladesh. The latest reports
This country was at the centre of the UN declaration of human rights in the first place. That came out of the huge atrocities committed by Hitler and out of the holocaust. That was a time when we learned that the plight of refugees is something we must face directly. It was also a time when we learned that ethnic cleansing and genocide should be condemned robustly and bravely.

Because of Britain’s historical relationship with Bangladesh and Burma, there is a moral responsibility in this House and on this Government to lead the charge across the world as we see human rights in crisis. These people are among the very poorest. Just as we have seen, on the continent of Europe, Greece, one of the poorest countries, picking up the burden of refugees from Syria and north Africa as most of Europe looks in the other direction, we now expect Bangladesh, in Asia, to do the same. This needs strong condemnation and a country aware of its own history and global history. This is a moment to stand up bravely for human rights.

Mr Speaker: I ask the representative of the Scottish National party not to exceed seven minutes because—I emphasise this to the House—a lot of people have put questions and I think it is important that the Minister has a proper opportunity to respond. I also want the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) to have a minute or two to respond at the end, in conformity with the usual practice on these occasions. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) is an obliging fellow, and I am sure he will oblige us.

5.40 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will try to reduce my speech significantly because the key points have been made, particularly on the awful atrocities that have been happening to the Rohingya people in Myanmar. We have heard horrific stories from Members around this Chamber, beginning with the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). Those atrocities include Government soldiers stabbing babies, cutting off boys’ heads, gang-raping girls, shooting 40 mm grenades into houses, burning entire families to death, and rounding up dozens of unarmed male villagers and summarily executing them. That says it all. When the UN branded the Burmese Government’s actions as “textbook ethnic cleansing”, that was being polite, to say the least.

For those who have survived to get into Bangladesh, the torture continues—not directly from the Burmese military but from malnutrition, cholera and other diseases. Save the Children has warned that over 14,000 children need food urgently. Sixty per cent. of all refugees are already suffering acute malnutrition and over 250,000 Rohingya and the Myanmar military have said they were driven out by hunger because food markets in Myanmar’s western Rakhine state had been shut down and aid deliveries restricted by the Burmese authorities.

The Government have donated £30 million in aid and pledged to match £5 million in donations to the DEC appeal for people fleeing Burma. The public response to this humanitarian crisis is profound. I pay tribute to all those who have worked so hard to raise funds for those fleeing the atrocities. The response must continue until the plight of the Rohingya is solved.

While aid is vital, we know that money can only do so much. We must find a political solution to end this barbaric persecution so that the Rohingya can return home in a dignified way to rebuild what is left of their devastated communities. The international community must help to ensure that no Rohingya refugees are forced back to Burma if they remain at risk of serious human rights violations.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been rightly condemned for her refusal to intervene in support of the Rohingya, but she has since pledged accountability—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but his contribution is at an end. I did not mean that unkindly—he has done very well—but his time is up.

5.37 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Much has been said about the situation, and I will say nothing more about it. I merely want to add my voice to the concern expressed at the reaction of the British Government and the international community as a whole.

On issues of human rights in recent times, the global north has been very long on rhetoric and very short on action. We have seen the atrocities in Darfur; we have seen the great city of Aleppo turned to rubble; and now we have this situation in Myanmar and the terrible plight of the Rohingya people.

There is something that connects so much of this. Is there a crisis in the UN itself when China and Russia refuse to accept a resolution that would condemn what we are seeing and that would see action? Is there a crisis in some countries including our own, because as we turn inwards, with huge concern about immigration, we turn away from the refugees fleeing atrocities across the world and we have so little to say?
My colleagues and I on the Committee will be going to Myanmar and Bangladesh and reporting back here as soon as we can. It is encouraging that the Department for International Development announced on Thursday that it will pledge £2 million to the crisis in addition to the £3 million it has already donated. The Scottish Government have also played a key part in pledging £120,000 to be made available for the emergency response.

I want to turn my attention to the UK Government’s decision to provide UK taxpayer-funded training to the Burmese army to the tune of £305,000 a year. The UK Government initially claimed that the training related to human rights, but were later forced to admit that only one hour in a 60-hour training course covered human rights. Considering the history of the Burmese military, the decision to train and trade with them is a spectacular failure of this Government’s foreign policy. The UK Government announced only last September that military training contracts between the British military and Myanmar would be immediately suspended, and I welcome that. However, ending the free training programme should be just one small part of a wide range of measures that put pressure on the military to end its violations of international law.

For too long the international community has tolerated the intolerable. Therefore, the UK must put strong international pressure on the Burmese civilian and military Government to stop the persecution and help negotiate a process for the protection of the remaining Rohingya in Myanmar and the return of those who have been forced to flee. There must also be a full restoration of international sanctions and a global arms embargo on Myanmar, and this needs to be imposed now. The UK Government must take the lead in building international support for this.

I was sorely disappointed when Aung San Suu Kyi refused to speak out against the violence as Myanmar’s de facto leader. In fact, her silence was so deafening that even fellow Nobel prize winners such as Desmond Tutu urged her to intervene to help with the crisis. Aung San Suu Kyi has been a hero of mine for a long time. She was imprisoned for nearly two decades after calling for democracy and human rights under the country’s oppressive military. She played a part in inspiring me to become involved in politics, as I am today. In a recent speech to Myanmar’s Parliament, she denied that there had been any “armed clashes” or “clearance operations” since 5 September this year. However, last week, in a welcome move, she announced plans to set up a civilian-led agency with foreign assistance to deliver aid and help to resettle Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state.

I appreciate that Aung San Suu Kyi may need to be careful not to inflame the situation further, as her adviser has said, and that she may have little influence over the powerful military. However, as a politically elected representative of the Government, and as someone who has championed human rights for decades, she has a moral responsibility, as well as a political one, to do right by all her people, which includes the Rohingya.

Many parts of the UK have already taken action. Glasgow City Council has written to Aung San Suu Kyi to give her one month before she loses the freedom of the city. My own city of Dundee is in the process of writing, and I have spoken out publicly. I would like to send a message to Aung San Suu Kyi today in the strongest terms. Her Government must now speak to the military, community leaders of Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists and the international community to end the cycle of persecution and violence, to prevent further loss of lives and homes, to restore law and order, to prevent violence from spreading to other parts of the country and to stamp out the online xenophobia that has been watched by the world.

I would like to end with some important words that inspired me in the past:

“It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.”

Those are not my words, but the words of Aung San Suu Kyi. I therefore urge her to act fearlessly in the face of power, in the face of those who surround her and in the face of those who are committing—all of us in this Chamber can call it what it is—genocide on this earth as I speak.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. We can now enjoy the brilliance from Bishop Auckland for a maximum of seven minutes.

5.46 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for initiating this debate, to the Backbench Business Committee for giving it time, to the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for describing the testimonies that she has heard and to the other 28 Members of the House who have spoken so passionately this afternoon.

The whole country has watched in horror as hundreds of thousands of people from Myanmar have been forced out of their homes and across the border into Bangladesh. The motion before us this afternoon is surely right. The UN defines ethnic cleansing as “a purposeful policy...to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.”

It includes murder, torture, rape, severe physical injury to civilians, forcible removal, displacement, deportation of a civilian population, deliberate military attacks or threats of attacks as well as the destruction of property, and robbery. These measures are clearly present in Myanmar. The office of the UN human rights commissioner found grave and serious violations, including the rape and murder of children. Rohingya villages in Rakhine state have been destroyed so as to ensure that the refugees cannot return to their homes. If they do, it would be to a barren wasteland that once held their crops, livestock and livelihoods.

The scale of the violence inflicted on civilians by the Myanmar military cannot be justified as a proportionate response to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. In fact, the UN makes it clear that a strategy was pursued to drive out the Rohingya before this, violating their rights and traumatising them. It is very disappointing that Aung San Suu Kyi did not immediately condemn the military actions. I saw the Minister’s dispatch from his recent visit on the BBC, and I have to take issue with the way he expressed himself. No one is asking her to emote, as he put it. The horror of the crimes needs simply to be acknowledged. They speak for themselves.
It is vital that we all put responsibility squarely where it belongs: with General Min Aung Hlaing, who has overseen the calculated attack on the Muslim Rohingya over many months, if not years.

I wrote to the Minister in September about a number of things, including Amnesty’s report on landmines. He replied to me, but he did not mention that. Could he please also raise that with the Myanmar Government?

The UK has a special duty to both Myanmar and Bangladesh due to our historical ties. The Foreign Secretary evidently knows them well, but reciting Kipling is not appropriate. We want to express our understanding in the form of an effective policy. The British public have been typically generous in responding to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal, and I urge people who are concerned to give in that way. It is the most effective way to help the Rohingya refugees, and I am pleased Ministers are matching the funding from the DFID budget.

It is now evident that the British Government need to be prepared to take a tougher line with the military of Myanmar. Will the Government encourage other countries to contribute to the £437 million target, which is the UN estimate of what is needed? It is essential to get the information that will secure the prosecution of those perpetrating crimes. Will the Government go back to his colleagues to see whether more money can be made available from the British Government so that disease is not the next thing to be visited on the refugees?

It is now evident that the British Government need to be prepared to take a tougher line with the military of Myanmar. Will the Government consider imposing personal sanctions and visa restrictions against the military and their families; promoting an international arms embargo mandated by the UN along the lines of the EU’s; and halting investment in and business with military-owned companies, and ending any aid flows to parts of the country that they control?

We need a long-term, sustainable solution. Myanmar has the highest number of stateless people, and until all minorities in Myanmar are equal under the law and are able to gain political representation, the transition to democracy for which so many have struggled for so long will not be complete.

5.52 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), for initiating this debate. I think all of us admire her heartfelt dedication and commitment to the Rohingya, and I appreciate the strength of feeling shown in the House during the debate. Given the constraints of time, I hope hon. Members will forgive me if I deal in writing over the next few days with some of the specific issues that have been raised.

I very much welcome this opportunity to update the House on the Government’s actions to address the appalling situation facing the Rohingya in Rakhine state. This is the latest manifestation of a long-standing hostilities. The Rohingya have suffered terrible persecution over several decades. Their already very limited rights, if we can call them that, have been eroded by successive military Governments, and as people without citizenship—stateless folk—they have become increasingly marginalised in Burma and, indeed, at times in Bangladesh as well.

The Rohingya have previously been victims of outbreaks of sustained violence and displacement, including in 2012 and as recently as October 2016, but the movement of people since 25 August and the violence by the security forces have been on an unprecedented scale. Deadly attacks on Rohingya communities by vigilante groups have also been reprehensible, and it is deeply concerning that these incidents have reportedly been carried out in collusion with the Burmese security forces.

As I have said, the consequences of this violence are appalling. I saw that for myself when I travelled there at the end of last month, as the first western Minister to visit Burma since the crisis began. What I heard in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state, was truly heartbreaking. When I visited camps in Burma, the descriptions of murder, rape and other human rights violations and abuses that I heard about—they had taken place only a matter of weeks earlier—were horrifying. Over half a million Rohingya refugees have fled their homes and crossed into Bangladesh. Others, including members of other ethnic communities, have been internally displaced within Rakhine in recent times. This is a human tragedy and a humanitarian catastrophe.

I want to say something slightly personal in relation to the issue of ethnic cleansing. Many Members recognise that we are reluctant to use that phrase. There is a personal reason for that and a broader reason. We have been trying diplomatically as far as possible to secure movement from the Burmese Government. In fact, there has been quite significant movement by Aung San Suu Kyi, which I shall come on to. There is also a more personal reason, which goes back to the rather provocative statement from the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). My mother was ethnically cleansed as a German national in the early months of 1945. She moved from the part of Germany in which my forefathers had lived since the 1720s, and to which she was able briefly to return as a visitor in her 50s. I have never seen that part of the world.

It is because the phrase “ethnic cleansing” is loaded with great emotion and a sense of finality that I have been relatively reluctant to use it. That is not in any way to disrespect the Rohingya, but we still maintain hope that many of them will be allowed to return safely to Burma—it may be a forlorn hope. However, I accept that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said that the situation seems like a textbook case of ethnic cleansing. I conclude, I am afraid, that that appears to be an increasingly accurate description of what has happened.

What is essential now is that the Burmese Government and the security forces enact the positive measures announced by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi on Thursday evening. That includes the establishment of a new civilian-led body to oversee the return of those who
have fled and the development of Rakhine into a state, perhaps with martial aid, in which all communities can live together sustainably. The security forces should ensure that the Rohingya feel safe to return. They must, in my view, permit a massive upsampling in international humanitarian relief in Burma that is desperately needed to reach those who remained in Rakhine or, we hope, will return there.

Within the international community—I am glad to say that most Members, although I accept not all, recognise this—the UK is playing a leading role, and it is right that we should do so for historical reasons, in seeking a solution to this political, diplomatic and humanitarian crisis. We continue to engage extensively with the Burmese Government to seek an end to the violence, and to secure full humanitarian access to Rakhine and the return of those Rohingya who have fled. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has spoken to Aung San Suu Kyi twice in recent weeks, and I held face-to-face negotiations and discussions with her in Nay Pyi Taw, the capital of Burma, on 27 September. During my visit I pressed civilian and military officials to stop the violence, to allow humanitarian access without delay, and to commit to the safe return of the Rohingya.

Ministerial colleagues across Government have been putting pressure on the Burmese Government and military. We have suspended military visits from Burma as well as our defence education co-operation. We are calling on the EU to do likewise. In response to the terrible humanitarian situation across the border in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, DFID is providing extensive assistance, and I want to thank my colleagues in that Department for playing an important role in mobilising international support. Bangladesh, as we know, faces an almost insurmountable challenge in providing genuine assistance to those refugees. Within days of the latest outbreak of hostilities, the UK Government, as has been pointed out, pledged an additional £30 million in support. Those funds are providing essential shelter, food and water to those in desperate need. We want to do more—far more—and the message from the House today will be heard loud and clear in that Department.

I visited Bangladesh after Burma last month, together with the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). We met Bangladeshi Ministers and senior officials, the UN and other development officials, and expressed our appreciation for the support that they were providing. In turn, they appreciated the UK’s leadership in providing humanitarian aid on the ground. We have also been working tirelessly to focus international attention and pressure on the Burmese security forces. We have raised the subject of Burma three times at the UN Security Council, and convened an international meeting in New York with Kofi Annan only last Friday. The Foreign Secretary also convened a meeting of Foreign Ministers at the UN General Assembly in New York on 18 September, and I was the only European Minister to address a meeting on Burma organised by the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation the following day, at which the UK Government were specifically singled out by the OIC’s Secretary General, a Saudi Arabian gentleman, for our diplomatic, political and humanitarian leadership in response to the crisis.

Through that engagement, we have galvanised the international community around a five-point plan: the security forces must stop the violence—no major violence has been reported since 2 September; full humanitarian access within Burma must be secured; refugees must be allowed to return to Burma in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner; the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, chaired by Kofi Annan, must be implemented rapidly and in full; and above all, Burma must grant access to, and fully co-operate with, the UN Human Rights Council’s fact-finding mission.

Although the civilian Government have started to make progress on these points, the Burmese security forces have not yet heeded the call. We are discussing the next steps in the Security Council to increase the pressure. However, as the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) discussed, getting a UN Security Council resolution requires the co-operation of both China and Russia, which we reckon would be likely to veto any such resolution.

My noble Friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon has made our concerns clear at the UN Human Rights Council, where we have mobilised the UN’s human rights machinery to address the situation. We have helped secure a six-month extension of the UN fact-finding mission to Burma so that it can properly examine the serious reports of human rights violations coming out of Rakhine, as well as the other conflicts in Kachin and Shan states. The role of neighbouring countries in restoring peace and security will inevitably be vital. That is why we continue to talk, despite our differences, with China, and with India and other regional states, to encourage them to play their part in resolving the crisis.

As I mentioned earlier, I also held talks with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi when I was in Burma. I very much understand the criticism and grave disappointment felt by many in the House, who previously regarded her as a heroine. However, if we fail to acknowledge—in part, at least—the pressures she is facing, that does not help us move towards solutions. She is walking a very fine line between international condemnation and Burmese public opinion, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) pointed out, overwhelmingly supports what the security forces are doing, terrible as that may sound.

Weakening Aung San Suu Kyi strengthens the military’s hand. Given how the security forces have attacked and persecuted the Rohingya in recent weeks, that is a terrifying thought. We must all help make a better future for the Rohingya still in Burma and for those who return. We also want to represent all the other people in Burma—there are many from all communities—who yearn for the human rights and democratic freedoms that we all enjoy. During our talks, Aung San Suu Kyi reiterated her pledge for a transparent process to allow for the return of all Rohingya who have fled to Bangladesh. She pledged to me that she would start immediately to implement the recommendations of Kofi Annan’s Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.

As I mentioned, in the past week Aung San Suu Kyi has publicly outlined a plan and vision for resolving the crisis, including the establishment of a civilian force to deliver humanitarian assistance; more aid, to both immediate and long-term development. The UK Government are watching closely to ensure that her positive words translate into swift action. We will keep challenging her to ensure...
that our five-point plan is implemented. I think I can speak for everyone in the House when I say that we stand ready to ensure that she gets whatever international political and technical support that is required to put the plan into place.

It was all too clear from my heartbreaking meetings in Rakhine with Rohingya Muslims, ethnic Buddhists and Hindus—civilians who had been forcibly displaced from their homes and had witnessed almost unspeakable atrocities—that communities in Burma remain deeply polarised. A palpable sense of mutual fear and mistrust remains.

The terrible events in Rakhine have been the saddest of reminders of these divides and of just how far Burma still has to go to become an effective civilian democracy. Resolving the current crisis and helping democracy truly take root will require sustained diplomatic and humanitarian engagement. Ultimately, however, only a democratic transition can embed any long-term progress and rights for the Rohingya. We will continue, through diplomacy, slowly but surely to press the civilian Government for rapid progress.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam said in his wise speech, the UK is unpopular in Burma for its activism on Rakhine, but there is much that the UK Government have already done and much that we shall continue to do on the humanitarian front. I must add in conclusion, however, that we also have vital diplomatic and political work to carry out. We cannot allow the humanitarian issue to crowd that out. If we do, future military dictatorships will believe that they can act with the same impunity in similar circumstances.

6.5 pm

Rushanara Ali: I thank my hon. Friends and hon. Members across the House for their moving contributions, for the unity of purpose and for their support for the motion. In particular, I thank those who spoke from direct experience of visiting camps and who spoke out about the appalling situation facing the Rohingya. Their testimonies were extremely powerful. It is vital that we continue to let the world know of the plight of the Rohingya refugees.

I also pay tribute to the British people for their support for the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal and to the people of Bangladesh for their generosity in campaigning and providing humanitarian assistance on the ground, where they now have a million refugees to host. I am grateful to the Minister for his contribution and the representations he has made on behalf of our Government, but I must emphasise the importance of the UK playing a leadership role in seeking a global arms embargo. Even if China, India and Russia oppose it, it is important that we can defend our position and that we do not regret our own lack of action or failure to put pressure on the military. It is also important that targeted sanctions against the business interests of the military be taken seriously and that the Minister provide an update on that point, which he did not address in his response.

Finally, I want to reiterate that we have been here before: in 2012, when more than 100,000 Rohingya Muslims were displaced; last year, when the military instigated this scorched-earth policy; and again in September. It is going to happen again. It is the military’s intention. Unless our Government and the international Government put pressure on the military, we will be back here again. I hope that we are not.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House agrees with the statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that the treatment of the Rohingya by the Myanmar Government amounts to a textbook case of ethnic cleansing.

Mr Speaker: I thank all colleagues who took part in today’s important debate. We come now to the Adjournment debate on the sale of puppies. Notwithstanding the excitement among colleagues, it is inexplicable that anybody should now choose to leave and not wish to hear the debate, both for the eloquence of the initial speech and with a sense of anticipation as to the Minister’s reply, but if colleagues insist on leaving, I know that they will do so quickly and quietly so that we can hear Mr Chris Evans.
Sale of Puppies

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Craig Whittaker.)*

6.9 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this timely opportunity to discuss the legislation relating to the sale of puppies in Great Britain, and the need for stricter enforcement of licences and inspections of breeders.

Owning a puppy can be a rite of passage for so many people. Being responsible for a dog is part of growing up. I still remember the very first puppy that we owned. I remember my mother going to Aberdare Corn Stores to buy a small puppy, which we called Pep, for £5. He lived until he was 17: he was one of the lucky ones. Even today, I am delighted that my own son Zac will grow up knowing the companionship, the loyalty and the friendship that owning a dog brings.

As I said, my mother paid £5 to Aberdare Corn Stores for our first dog, but those days are long gone. More people shop online now than ever before, so why should finding a puppy for sale be any different? Puppies are found and purchased without the buyer ever knowing where the dog has truly come from, or having any information about the breeder. People buy on the assumption that the puppy must have been bred in humane conditions. Sadly, that is not always the case, which is why there is now a need to discuss and review the problems with the current pet sale legislation and the licensing of breeders.

The sale of pets in Great Britain is governed by the Pet Animals Act 1951, which covers breeders as well as third-party sales groups such as pet shops. It is old legislation, predating the internet. Let me put the Act in perspective. When it was passed, Winston Churchill was leader of the Conservative party and Clement Attlee was leader of the Labour party. It was passed three years before Elvis Presley would have his first hit record, and teddy boys were walking the streets of Great Britain. All those are long gone.

That means that there is currently no law in the UK to regulate the sale of pets online. It would seem to be madness for us to legislate today for technological developments that will come 60 years in the future, but effectively that is what happened 60 years ago. The lack of regulation has consequences. Many unlicensed breeders have slipped off the radar of the local authorities responsible for them. Without regulation, the welfare of animals is compromised and unscrupulous breeders make tens of thousands of pounds in tax-free profit from naive buyers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman brings great issues to Adjournment debates and other debates in the House, and I congratulate him on that. Does he agree that simple humanity should dictate an end to puppy farm breeding, and that there must be legislation to formalise standards for anyone who wishes to sell a puppy, whether it be a pedigree dog or a mongrel?

Chris Evans: Of all the Members whom I expected to intervene on my speech, I would have expected the hon. Gentleman to do so in particular. He is a fantastic parliamentarian and I know that he loves this place. Again, he has made a very good point. I do, however, ask him please to let me continue my speech, in which I will answer his question.

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home suggests that 88% of puppies born in the UK are bred by unlicensed breeders. Many people are falling into the trap of buying puppies from third-party sellers such as puppy farms, and some puppies are illegally smuggled from Ireland and Eastern Europe. Those who run puppy farms and puppy-smuggling businesses are rarely concerned with the welfare of their dogs and puppies. The mothers are treated like machines, bred within an inch of their lives, producing far more litters of puppies in a year than is legally allowed. They are kept in horrific conditions. “Unpicking the Knots”, a report produced recently by Blue Cross for Pets, found that many dogs were kept in enclosed spaces such as rabbit hutches, and without water. As an animal lover and a dog owner, I find that completely abhorrent.

The puppies and their mothers are seen not as sentient beings, but merely as pathways to profit. Puppies are seized from their mothers long before the 12 weeks for which they are supposed to stay with them are up and are sold, malnourished and without vital vaccinations, to unwitting buyers. As a result, many irresponsibly bred puppies end up with life-threatening illnesses such as parvovirus and kennel cough. New dog owners are then faced with the financial and emotional hardship of ongoing veterinary treatment or, in many cases, the death of the puppy, which means that the buyer has essentially spent hundreds of pounds on a dog who lives for no more than six months.

Although, as I said earlier, our dog lived for many long years, I remember the first thing that happened when we brought him home from the pet shop. His hair fell out because he was infested with mange. We took him to the vet and found out that he was only two and a half weeks old. His eyes had just opened. I accept that that was many years ago—in 1989—but it still happens in this day and age.

Snatching puppies from their mothers too early can have ongoing impacts on the lucky dogs that do make it. The first 12 weeks of a dog’s life are its most important, with those crucial moments socialising with its mother and littermates dictating the dog’s future temperament as an adult. As a result, dogs born of irresponsible breeding often grow into anxious and aggressive adults, which can lead to additional costs being incurred in training and behavioural classes for the owners.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The hon. Gentleman describes very well the puppy farms, which are disgraceful and operate in agricultural terms in southern Ireland. Does he agree that Operation Delphin at the port of Cairnryan in my constituency, which to date has led to the seizure and return of over 500 puppies, has been a huge success? Does he also welcome the fact that that pilot scheme has been extended for another year, so it is to be hoped that the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals will now be able to get on and send even more puppies back to the farms they came from, and stamp out this illegal trade?

Chris Evans: I know of that case in Dumfries, and it is a brilliant example, but as I will say later, this is all about enforcement, as there is only so much the Government
can do through legislation. They should, however, look at the examples the hon. Gentleman has raised as a way forward.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am listening with great interest to the powerful case the hon. Gentleman is unfolding about the horrors of this trade. He mentions enforcement, but does he agree that there might be a role, in addition to the legislative aspect he is looking at, for education for the public, so that people know the questions to ask of the seller? If they know there are certain red flags to suggest the puppy has come from an illegal source, that might help.

Chris Evans: To make a wider point, a fantastic aspect of this debate is that so many people have come to me with solutions. The hon. Gentleman is right: there should be a multifaceted attack on puppy farms and illegal dog breeding, and it should include education and raising red flags, as he suggests.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and I am pleased to be attending it. Good friends of mine who are intelligent human beings who really worry about the care of animals have been taken in by puppy dealers, and by the role played by the child of the puppy dealer, pretending that the puppy in question is a loved puppy that has been with their family for ages. They can be completely unscrupulous in the stories they tell and the ways in which they dupe members of the public.

Chris Evans: These puppy breeders will go to any lengths to make a case and secure a sale; it is all about profit.

I will use the example of my current dog; he is a fantastic dog with a great temperament. The key difference between the purchase of my first dog, which my mother bought from a pet shop, and that of my current dog is that I went to a reputable dealer, and met the mother and father, and saw what the puppy was like. The dealer also provided examples of what other puppies from that litter were like. There was a lot of further important information, too. I also had an information pack, so I knew who I was dealing with. We have had a fantastic time with the dog I have now.

In this age of modern technology, consumers are increasingly turning to online shopping to purchase their goods, and it is no different when buying a puppy. However, as I have mentioned, online sellers are shipping through the net and are becoming increasingly difficult to regulate and identify.

Blue Cross has been working in partnership with classified ad site Gumtree, which has been able to track repeated advertisers of puppies. It found that online sellers were using multiple email addresses, placing hundreds of adverts over the course of 24 months, and selling in multiple local authority areas—all the classic signs of a puppy farmer.

These cases are only a drop in the ocean of the wider problem of unlicensed breeders abusing the legislation. The Pet Animals Act 1951 must be updated in line with modern internet use. I know the Department has in the past said that it believes the definition of a pet shop to be wide enough to include the sale of pets online, but the horrific reality of what is happening says otherwise.

However, updating the legislation is only one way in which we can tackle the problem. It is also vital that we are firmer with the enforcement of licences and with inspections of breeders, which must be more frequent and thorough.

In Wales, we are steps ahead of the rest of the country when it comes to regulating dog breeders. The Animal Welfare (Breeding of Dogs) (Wales) Regulations 2014 enabled the Welsh Government to enforce stricter rules for those wishing to breed dogs for profit. This is certainly a step in the right direction and I urge England and Scotland to follow suit, but the legislation is only as strong as the practices of the licensing officers. As elsewhere in the UK, local authorities in Wales are severely underfunded, and licensing officers are therefore not fully equipped or trained to do the job at full capacity. Many juggle multiple job roles, from inspecting food outlets in the morning to assessing dog breeders in the afternoon. Without full animal welfare training, licensing officers are unable to properly assess how fit a breeding establishment is for purpose. As a result, many puppy farms are issued licences. It is important to realise that this is not a Wales-only problem, a Scotland-only problem, a Northern Ireland-only problem or an England-only problem. It is a problem not only for the four nations but across European borders, and we need joined-up thinking on this.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for bringing forward the debate this evening. As a fellow Welsh MP, he will know that one of the great embarrassments for us is the fact that puppy farming is quite prevalent to the west of our constituencies. My opinion on puppy farming has changed considerably since I went on a DEFRA Committee visit there last year. I was for puppy farming, but having visited a puppy farm, I changed my mind completely. The dogs were not allowed to be dogs; they were just breeding machines. I agree with almost everything that the hon. Gentleman has said, but I must point out that in Wales the law is already there and that the problem lies in its enforcement.

Chris Evans: That is absolutely right. The hon. Gentleman and I are both south Wales MPs. If anyone visiting Pembrokeshire drives down the road from Swansea to Carmarthenshire, all they will see are signs saying “Puppies for sale” and “Dogs for sale.” They might wonder why people are constantly selling puppies and dogs. Enforcement is the real issue; it is the crux of the problem. We might have the legislation but we also need strong enforcement.

I understand that in enforcing stricter and more robust licensing laws, the work of the already thinly stretched and underfunded local authorities will increase. There is an urgent need for additional funding for local authorities, but the expertise of the third sector can also have a role. That is why I advocate charities such as the Dogs Trust, Blue Cross and the RSPCA working alongside the local authorities to aid them with inspections and with the enforcement of licensing standards. We cannot rely solely on the third sector to fix all our problems, but it is important that we foster collaboration between local authorities and the animal welfare charities that are experts in the area.

We cannot talk about licences without talking about fees. There are no standardised licensing fees for dog breeders, and prices per local authority vary from £23 to £782.
It is no wonder that many responsible breeders are so put off applying for a licence. One way of rectifying this is by introducing a risk-based approach to licensing, with the level of risk that a breeding business poses determining the fee. There could be a rating system, with those with higher points and adhering to higher standards of breeding being awarded lower licensing fees. Such financial incentives would encourage compliance with higher standards and better practice—almost like the road fund licence in relation to polluting cars.

In addition to the aforementioned proposals, we need to look further at third-party sales of puppies. Yes, we could call for a ban, but it is clear that the internet is like the wild west at the moment. It is so unlicensed that it would be difficult to clamp down on those third-party sales. I am therefore asking the Government to introduce an information campaign and to make it mandatory for a buyer to see the puppy interacting with its mother and its littermates before purchase; but we would need to ensure that such a requirement could be enforced. As unlicensed breeders become increasingly savvy in working round the regulations of breeding, it could only work if local authorities were given the necessary resources, perhaps using the proceeds of a licensing fee for that purpose. We should also contemplate forcing breeders to provide full seller information when posting adverts, and introducing the practice of assigning every breeder a unique identification number, as France has recently done.

**Yasmin Qureshi** *(Bolton South East)* (Lab): It is great that my hon. Friend has secured this Adjournment debate. I have received many letters on this issue, and I want to let the Minister know that it is a real matter of concern for many of our constituents. I thank my hon. Friend for raising it.

**Chris Evans**: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a diligent Member of Parliament and a good friend since I came to the House.

In conclusion, I urge the Government to review the current legislation surrounding sales of puppies and other pets in the UK. The 1951 Act must be updated to regulate online sales of puppies. More importantly, we need to ensure that local authorities and licensing officers receive full appropriate training to do their jobs properly. Once that has been established, we can consider a ban on third-party sales.

This debate has shown the House at its very best, and I know that many Members will support me on this initiative. Dogs bring so much joy to our lives and help us in so many ways. Whether we keep dogs for work, as a health aid or simply for companionship, it is high time that we gave something back to our four-legged friends and afforded them the protection they deserve. My life has been enlightened by owning a dog. Dogs are important to me, and I will own dogs for the rest of my life.

Finally, I thank Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Blue Cross, RSPCA, Dogs Trust and the International Fund for Animal Welfare for their tireless work to improve welfare standards for dogs and animals across the country, and for bringing often ignored issues to the country’s attention. I hope the Minister will take on board some of the constructive suggestions that we have heard in this debate.

**The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food** *(George Eustice)*: I congratulate the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing this debate on a subject that is dear to many hon. Members’ hearts, including mine. He gave an account of his first family pet when he was young, and I never give up the opportunity in such debates to talk about Mono, a rather erratic border collie that I adopted from the RSPCA. He lived to a good age and, certainly in the last seven years of his life, had a good life on our farm.

As a Back Bencher and a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, I campaigned to change the rules around the licensing of puppy breeding. I was therefore pleased to have the opportunity to become a DEFRA Minister, and then to become responsible for companion animals. For once, I was in a position to see through something that I had sought for some time. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, many people and organisations have been calling for more restrictions on the breeding and selling of dogs. I initiated a consultation, which Lord Gardiner has continued, and I now have the opportunity to update the House on some of our plans.

The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that many of the ideas that he outlined are exactly what we are planning to do and exactly what we have already consulted on. The Government will be replacing existing laws on the breeding and selling of dogs with a stricter licensing regime. The regime will, for the first time, be linked directly to the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and will introduce several important changes. First, we will lower the threshold under which a dog breeder needs a licence, moving it from five litters or more to three litters or more, thus ensuring that more commercial dog breeders will be required to have a licence.

Secondly, we will require all dog breeders and the sellers of all pet animals, including dogs, to adhere to statutory minimum welfare standards that will be linked to the welfare needs set out in the 2006 Act. That is important for raising standards and improving consistency in the licensing regimes that local authorities put in place. Thirdly, we will remove the exemption through which some people who breed from their own pet dog claim that they do not need a licence to sell puppies. Fourthly—the hon. Gentleman made this point—we intend to reward licensees who are considered to be at low risk of breaching the new regulations. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, many people and organisations have been calling for more restrictions on the breeding and selling of dogs.

Finally—this goes to the heart of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised—we intend to make it clear that anyone in the business of selling dogs online will need a licence from their local authority. As he says, our legal view has always been clear that the 1951 Act, which regulates the licensing of pet shops, already provides that anyone in the business of selling dogs, whether they have a shop on the high street or are selling online, requires a licence, but we have accepted in the consultation that there may be a sense of ambiguity. We therefore want to place the requirement beyond any doubt, so I reassure him that we will be doing precisely what he asks for.
There have also been calls for more robust inspections. The statutory minimum welfare standards will have to be applied by local authorities, and the regulations will be accompanied by guidance to which local authorities must have regard. The regulations will require all inspectors to be suitably qualified, and the guidance will set out what “suitably qualified” means.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): As a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, I am pleased to hear about some of the proposed changes. However, who will bear the cost of training suitably qualified inspectors at the local authority level?

George Eustice: As the hon. Lady knows, local authorities already have budgets for such things and departments that deal with animal welfare. We will be addressing exactly what is required by “suitably qualified”. Most local authorities already have people who are suitably qualified, although they might require additional training.

Lyn Brown: The Minister was doing well up to that point. We all know that our local authorities are under particular pressure. If this is to mean anything, the Government will have to put some money into it.

George Eustice: Local authorities are already required to carry out such activity. They already have animal welfare departments and dog wardens, and they already issue licensing conditions for a range of things. They already have trading standards departments. I think I have addressed that point, so I will move on, because other important issues have been raised.

Chris Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for all his welcome proposals. One thing that we have not tackled so far is illegal imports. Supply does not equal demand in this country, because people want more puppies and dogs than the breeders in this country can supply. How do the Government plan to address that real problem? As we have heard, puppies often travel in difficult conditions and die within a few weeks of being in this country.

George Eustice: If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I intend to return to that issue.

I conclude on the licensing point by thanking the many stakeholder organisations and animal welfare groups that have already contributed to our contribution and the formulation of these draft regulations. The hon. Member for Islwyn raised a point about the sale of puppies under eight weeks old, and he said that the first dog he had was sold at two and a half weeks. A couple of things are being done. First, the microchipping regulations that were introduced two years ago already require that no dog can be sold until it has been microchipped, and it is unlawful to microchip a dog until it is eight weeks old. In the normal course of events, it is already the case that no dog under the age of eight weeks can be sold.

Again, there is some ambiguity under the 1951 Act, and some people have identified the fact that a small number of pet shops might have been able to sell dogs under eight weeks old. We will put the situation beyond doubt in the regulations by making it clear that no puppy below that age can be sold. I want to move on to maximum sentences for animal cruelty as that is another important area in which we have recently made some announcements. The issue has been raised a number of times, including in private Members’ Bills promoted by several hon. Members, notably my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). The Government have made it clear that we will increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty from six months’ imprisonment to five years’ imprisonment. The maximum sentence needs to be increased for the most horrific acts, such as deliberate, calculating and sadistic behaviour. The offences for which that would apply could include causing unnecessary suffering to an animal and holding organised animal fights. The existing six-month limit does not allow judges to pass the most appropriate sentence in such circumstances. We want to send a clear message that animal cruelty is not acceptable in our society, and a Bill to effect the necessary changes to the Animal Welfare Act will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I turn now to the question of a ban on the third-party sale of puppies. This issue is often raised and the hon. Member for Islwyn, to be fair, rightly pointed out the difficulty that enforcing such a ban would involve. We do not believe that a ban on third-party sellers is necessary, and that view is shared by many stakeholders. We believe that a better approach is to aim for more robust licensing of pet sellers, as well as continued encouragement that people source dogs from reputable breeders and see any puppy interact with its mother, and consider a rescue or re-homed dog first, alongside consumer pressure to drive down the sales of dogs from third parties such as pet shops. The evidence shows that that is already happening, with as few as 4% of pet shops now licensed to sell dogs. That figure is always declining, and the reality is that even fewer shops actually do so.

We want to drive up animal welfare standards rather than introduce bans that are difficult to enforce. That is why the new regulations will set statutory minimum welfare standards for all commercial pet sellers that the local authority must apply when considering whether to issue a licence. There will also be an opportunity to apply higher standards, with pet sellers and dog breeders able to earn recognition so that the better performers will increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty from six months’ imprisonment to five years’ imprisonment. The existing six-month limit does not allow judges to pass the most appropriate sentence in such circumstances. We want to send a clear message that animal cruelty is not acceptable in our society, and a Bill to effect the necessary changes to the Animal Welfare Act will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I turn now to the issue of online sales. I particularly wish to point out to hon. Members that the Department established the Pet Advertising Advisory Group some years ago. DEFRA has already published guidance on buying a pet and has worked closely with PAAG to drive up standards for online advertisements. It is important that we give credit where it is due, so I should like to take this opportunity to praise PAAG’s work, which has resulted in six of the largest online sites signing up to agreed minimum standards for sites that advertise pet animals for sale. The types of measures that have been introduced include: a requirement that all adverts display the age of the animal advertised, with no pet advertised
George Eustice:

for transfer to a new owner before it is weaned and no longer dependent on its parents; a permanent ban on vendors on a “three strikes and you’re out” basis, so that those who attempt to post illegal adverts can be blocked indefinitely from advertising on any of these sites; and steps to ensure that every “view item” page includes prominent links to PAAG’s advice on buying and selling a pet, which can ensure that someone who is searching for a dog or any other pet is targeted with informative emails to tell them what they need to know so that they will be able to care for that pet. The standards are being applied by half a dozen or so sites, including the main ones. People who are looking online should be advised to keep to those sites that have signed up to PAAG’s minimum standards.

Angela Smith: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I, too, applaud PAAG for its work—it has been very successful—but some advertisements are disappearing only to be found on sites other than the big six. Surely the Minister agrees that the Government have done part but not all of the job of dealing with problems relating to online sales.

George Eustice: As I pointed out earlier, with the new regulations we are putting it beyond doubt that anyone selling online requires a pet licence. That is how the UK Government can address the issue. The hon. Lady will understand that we do not have jurisdiction over a classified ads operation based in Australia, for instance. What we can do, however, is to ensure that anyone who attempts to sell via the internet, wherever the classified ad website might be registered, will nevertheless require a licence. We continue to apply many of the other standards of the code, including the requirement that licensed breeders or sellers must display a licence number, and the need for an advert to include a photo of the pet and to set out its age. We have made good progress on online sales.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) asked about the responsibility of buyers. It is a sad fact that unsuspecting buyers sometimes unwittingly provide a lucrative market for rogue dog breeders and dealers. Potential buyers need to take great care when they are considering taking on a puppy. They should always insist on seeing the mother when they purchase a puppy. My hon. Friend asked whether there are warning signs. If someone arranges to meet at a motorway service station to sell a puppy, that should be a warning sign. Before people buy a puppy, they should consider whether they have the right lifestyle to look after a dog for the next 10 to 15 years and, if so, what type or breed of dog is right for them. They should also consider whether they are prepared to spend the sort of money and commit the sort of time needed to look after a dog for the duration of its lifetime.

There is plenty of advice out there to help people to make the right choice when they buy a puppy. Such advice includes making sure that the breeder is a member of the Kennel Club’s assured breeder scheme or signed up to the puppy contract, which is of course supported by many animal welfare organisations, including the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust, Blue Cross and Battersea Dogs & Cats Home. Such advice can help to inform buyers before they make purchases. In addition, the new regulations I have outlined will help to ensure that puppies born in a licensed dog breeding establishment have a better chance than those born in backstreet breeding establishments.

Finally, I wish to address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) about illegal puppy imports and to talk about some of the work we are doing on that. We are aware that some puppies may be smuggled into this country from abroad to be sold as pets. DEFRA takes the illegal puppy trade seriously. Responsibility for deterring the illegal movement of puppies starts with their country of origin. Dogs, including puppies, and cats, including kittens, that move to the UK from EU member states, or from other low-rabies-risk third countries, must have received a rabies vaccination at not earlier than 12 weeks of age, after which there must be a wait of 21 days to allow immunity to develop. In practice, that means that puppies or kittens that enter the UK legally will always be a minimum of 15 weeks old.

The UK carries out more pet checks at the border than most member states. All pet animals that travel on approved routes are checked for their compliance to travel. Enforcement at the border also has an important part to play in combating the illegal trade. We are grateful for the Dog Trust’s continued support of the Dover puppy pilot. This partnership between the Dogs Trust, transport companies, Kent County Council and the Animal and Plant Health Agency has so far resulted in 649 non-compliant animals being seized and placed into quarantine since December 2015. DEFRA’s Animal and Plant Health Agency has also played a leading role. Crucially, it has helped to age puppies and identify those that have been illegally smuggled into the country when they are too young.

If a transport company suspects that undeclared pets are present in a vehicle, it can alert the appropriate authorities so that they can take the necessary action. Border Force and local authorities share intelligence and monitor movements, and Border Force officials are constantly searching vehicles for a range of things, and when they detect animals being smuggled in illegally, they alert APHA.

The Government are responding to concerns about the welfare of puppies. This issue has been dear to my heart both as a Back Bencher and as a Minister. I am sure that the hon. Member for Islwyn will be reassured to hear that the Government are already implementing many of the measures that he seeks. Indeed, perhaps reading our consultation gave him some thoughts about this area. I am clear that the measures that we are implementing will improve the welfare of our dogs and give them the respect that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

6.45pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Hurricane Relief (Caribbean)

1. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps she is taking to provide hurricane relief in the Caribbean. [901226]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): The UK Government mounted an enormous cross-Government response to the devastating hurricanes consisting of more than 40 aid experts, 2,000 military personnel and more than 50 police officers, with HMS Ocean, RFA Mounts Bay and more than 600 tonnes of humanitarian aid. I give my thanks to our military and civilian personnel, whose efforts during the hurricane relief effort were simply heroic.

Scott Mann: Will my right hon. Friend assure me that our friends in the Commonwealth who have been affected by these recent hurricanes are receiving support and aid as they recover?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The hurricanes have been devastating, and I have seen their effect across our overseas territory. I can absolutely give the House an assurance that we are not just supporting the overseas territories; we are now working with them on the recovery and the rebuilding efforts, in addition to the relief efforts.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On Friday, the Secretary of State finally announced her big plans for the Caribbean’s recovery—a private sector taskforce, but not a penny of new funding. What are her plans to ensure that that taskforce helps those in need, rather than fat-cat profiteers? Is this really the best the UK Government can do?

Priti Patel: We are very focused on resilience as part of the recovery programme and dealing with the challenges faced in respect of climate change. The implications of climate change for small island states are very much a focus of DFID, but also across the Government. We are leading many of the discussions internationally in terms of climate change—how we support resilience programmes through our aid budget, but also how to help countries have the preparedness that they need to deal with some of these disasters.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): On Friday, the Secretary of State for International Development announced that she has suspended her big plans for the Caribbean’s recovery. What are her plans now?

Priti Patel: Let me politely say to my hon. Friend that that is not wholly accurate. When it comes to support for the military budget, he will know that part of the official overseas development assistance goes to the Ministry of Defence, so, as I said earlier, this has been a cross-Government effort involving the Foreign Office, the MOD and the Department for International Development, and others, including the Home Office. We have all been providing a great deal of support to the overseas territories.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The Secretary of State is right that the scenes of devastation that we have witnessed are heartbreaking. As well as helping victims, we must try to prevent future damage, so will she reverse the recent trend in reducing DFID climate change funding, especially for the adaptation work that is so crucial to help vulnerable communities become resilient to hurricanes and other climate-related disasters?

Leaving the EU: Preferential Trade

2. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on securing preferential trading access to the UK for least developed countries after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): DFID and the Department for International Trade are working together to prepare and plan for the day when Britain finally leaves the EU in 2019, when we will start to secure duty-free access to less developed countries and work on trade preferences.
Colin Clark: The oil and gas industry, which is important to my constituency, uses copper and nickel—major exports of less developed countries such as Madagascar and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Does my right hon. Friend agree that free trade with those countries is good for them and good for the UK?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am well aware of his constituency’s links with the sectors he mentions. By increasing trade opportunities for UK firms, we can help the world’s poorest countries trade themselves out of poverty, which everyone in the House wants.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): In many of the countries in which the Department for International Development operates, co-operation on the ground with the European Union is crucial to the impact of our efforts. Will the Secretary of State assure us that work is being done to ensure that development co-operation with the EU continues?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about development co-operation. We lead in many countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally, but co-operation is vital to delivering on the ground for the world’s poorest. We will continue to work not only with the EU, but with other partners in some of the poorest parts of the world where they can add value and where there is great need.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The United Kingdom has historically imported 50% of the sugar that we consume on preferential terms from developing countries, and it is then refined by Tate & Lyle. Will the Secretary of State reassure the House that the jobs, both at home and abroad, that depend on that agreement will be given proper consideration in the Brexit negotiations?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about trade preferences and the implications for securing jobs in this country and about creating new markets in developing countries and new trading opportunities. As part of the discussions, those subjects will be at the heart of securing a prosperous future for our country and for poor countries around the world.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): What reassurance can the Secretary of State provide that post-Brexit trade agreements for the least developed countries will enshrine good-quality employment rights and high standards of health and safety, align with fair trade policies and support trade union recognition?

Priti Patel: It is important for the hon. Lady to recognise that Britain is at the forefront of that, unlike the EU, which has yet to agree trade preferences and good trading opportunities with some of the world’s poorest countries. Britain will lead the world in free trade, but, importantly, we will also help the poorest countries to invest in skills, technical assistance and capacity building and create new markets. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady says no, but she should recognise that her party did little when in government to support trade in poor countries, which is exactly what this Conservative Government are doing.

11. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Brexit offers us the opportunity to go further than the EU’s rules and to strengthen the UK’s offer on trade with the world’s poorest countries, so that they can trade their way out of poverty?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The mission of this Government and of my tenure at DFID is to do exactly that. We want to ensure that economic development is at the heart of everything we do, meaning free trade, market access and helping countries to stand on their own two feet.

Natural Disasters: Emergency Funds

3. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps is she taking to ensure that emergency funds can be made available from the aid budget to help British overseas territories to recover from natural disasters?

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Overseas development assistance rules have not and will not stop Britain providing money needed for the hurricane recovery and reconstruction effort. The UK has committed over £60 million to the Irma and Maria relief efforts, and we are of course working with all our international partners to provide support.

Craig Tracey: Does the Secretary of State agree that recent events highlight the need for greater use of disaster recovery insurance to protect vulnerable nations, such as those in the Caribbean? Will she update the House on the Department’s work in that area?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility has paid out $49 million in the last month alone to the islands affected by the recent hurricanes. Through the World Bank and other international financial institutions, Britain and the British insurance industry are leading the way in providing more insurance support internationally.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): In recent years, 58% of deaths caused by disasters have occurred in fragile states. What assurance can the Secretary of State give us that the aid budget for disaster relief will remain compliant with official development assistance rules and will focus on resilience and recovery for some of the world’s most vulnerable people living in those fragile nations?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is right to highlight the fragility of many countries. Our aid budget is there to provide relief and the preparedness to help them to deal with many of the disasters and catastrophes that take place through climate change and conflict and through man-made disasters, too. That is effectively DFID’s focus.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Would a cross-departmental unit focused on the overseas territories, staffed by DFID, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, help to solve some of the problems of co-ordination and provide a better response to our OTs?
Priti Patel: My hon. Friend highlights the importance of co-ordination. The cross-Government hurricane relief effort was strong and co-ordinated. We have to respond accordingly to crises when they happen, and we work together effectively. We are joined up and are making sure that we deliver for the people who need help.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): We are just 10 days away from the negotiations in Paris on changing the ODA rules, and the Government still cannot clearly tell us their position. Will the Secretary of State tell us what changes the UK Government are seeking? Can she guarantee those changes will not divert aid away from the poorest?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The House may have noticed that the secretary-general of the OECD was in town yesterday, and I met both him and the chair of the Development Assistance Committee to discuss this issue. They are the first to recognise that such small island states need resilience to the impact of climate change and that we need greater agility in applying the rules to many of those countries. We will have that discussion at the DAC in 10 days’ time.

Rohingya Refugees (Bangladesh)

4. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to increase long-term support for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. [901229]

5. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. [901230]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): The UK is the largest bilateral donor to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. DFID has worked in Cox’s Bazar for many, many years, and it has recently stepped up efforts with an additional £30 million in the light of the refugee crisis. We are working with many partners, and I am sure all colleagues in the House, including those who spoke in yesterday’s debate, recognise the difficulties we face in providing aid because of the scale of the refugee crisis. Britain is leading, and we are working with our international aid partners.

David Hanson: I accept that the UK is the largest bilateral donor, but the Secretary of State will know there is a United Nations conference on the issue next week. Will she clarify today the UK Government’s objectives at that conference? How will she put pressure on other countries to step up to the plate, too?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have already called for violence to stop and, importantly, for aid access to be granted. The point about the UN efforts is that we have to have a co-ordinated approach and response to the aid effort, aid delivery and aid access. It is also important that we ensure our voices are heard by the Burmese military, so that they stop the violence and introduce protections for the Rohingya people, rather than the persecution we have seen so far.

Mary Creagh: Although the majority of Rohingya Muslims have sought sanctuary in Bangladesh, 40,000 refugees in India face deportation back to Burma. Has the Secretary of State raised that with her Indian counterparts? If not, will she now guarantee that she will do so?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the plight of the Rohingya people inside India, which shows the level of dispersal and displacement. With my Foreign Office counterparts—the two Departments are obviously working together—I will pick this up with the Indian Government. Importantly, our focus right now is on the relief efforts in the light of the humanitarian catastrophe in Bangladesh.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What pressure can be applied to the authorities in the region and particularly to the office of Aung San Suu Kyi? Tributes have been paid to her in the past for her work to bring people together to try to bring an end to the onslaught and murder that continue in the region.

Priti Patel: Of course Aung San Suu Kyi has an important role to play. She has a voice, and she needs to use it to stop the persecution and, with the Burmese military and with what is effectively her Government, to create routes home for the Rohingya people, giving them security, rather than the fleeing and persecution we have seen. It is not just for the British Government, although we are doing this, but for all international voices to step up, come together and make that abundantly clear to her.

Commonwealth Development

6. Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): What steps she is taking to promote development in other Commonwealth countries. [901231]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): The Prime Minister and Secretary of State have made it clear that the Commonwealth is absolutely central to our future policy, and that is not just true in respect of forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings; the 20 largest DFID recipient countries include Nigeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Malawi and Sierra Leone, in which our programmes extend from health and education, to economic development, without which there can be no jobs or growth.

Mr Speaker: We appreciate the power of recall of the hon. Gentleman’s exceptionally fertile mind.

Adam Afriyie: Given the health and vibrant link between Commonwealth countries that open up to trade and their subsequent rapid economic development, does my hon. Friend agree that we have not only an economic imperative, but a moral obligation to do whatever we can with foreign aid to focus our efforts on supporting free trade? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We are discussing very serious matters appertaining to the livelihoods of our friends in Commonwealth countries, as we have been treating of a great many other serious issues. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) had to contend with excessive noise, but I am sure the House will now be calmed as it listens to the flow of the eloquence of the Minister of State.
Rory Stewart: Absolutely. In this, as with everything, the devil is in the detail. For example, through TradeMark East Africa, DFID is not just supporting light manufacturing and trade and tariff negotiations, but reducing delays at borders and investing in infrastructure. Of course, most importantly, we will be providing tariff-free access to the least developed countries in the world after Brexit.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): School students from Lesotho are visiting Wrexham this week for the 11th year as a result of building on global school partnerships. Why is Lesotho excluded from the list of countries that the Department is supporting, which the Minister gave earlier?

Rory Stewart: This is a very good challenge. This is partly to do with Lesotho’s economic status, as DFID has tended to concentrate on the poorest countries in the world. However, we take the current difficulties in Lesotho very seriously, and I hope to visit it in the near future to look directly at this issue.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): One practical way to promote development in Commonwealth countries is through DFID’s procurement, so will the Minister examine ways to increase procurement with businesses in developing countries to strengthen the private sector there and increase employment growth?

Rory Stewart: Procurement is central to the Secretary of State’s reforms in DFID. She has made open and transparent procurement, and a suppliers review run by my right hon. Friend Lord Bates, central to how we take this forward, and of course that is right. Getting procurement right can help not only businesses, but the poorest people in the world.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister accept that there are many places in the Commonwealth where conflict is still ever present? Will he assure me that DFID will never cut back on moneys for peace and reconciliation before we even get to the opportunity of development?

Rory Stewart: Conflict is probably the biggest single driver of economic catastrophe, poverty and refugees in the world. We will continue to commit half our budget to fragile and conflict-affected states, because without peace there can be no development.

Topical Questions

T1. [901241] Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Over the next five years, the UK is providing £175 million in life-saving humanitarian aid to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where political insecurity and increasing violence are forcing people to flee their homes.

Kelvin Hopkins: Sustainable development goal 4 focuses on inclusive and quality education for all, but a recent joint report by Leonard Cheshire and the UN Girls’ Education Initiative has found that girls’ education, especially of those with disabilities, is being overlooked in many developing countries. Will the Government seek to advance this SDG with the utmost vigour to ensure equal educational opportunities for all across the world?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the value and importance of girls’ education around the world. DFID and the UK Government lead in this area. We have encouraged, through the UN and other international bodies, other countries to step up, and of course we will continue to do that.

T2. [901242] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What action does my right hon. Friend believe is necessary to counter the rise in resistance to antimalarial drugs in south-east Asia? In the past 17 years, we have seen much progress on reducing incidences of malaria around the world.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that tackling malaria saves lives. It has a positive impact on improving health services for the poor and increases economic growth and productivity in affected countries. In April 2017, the UK announced that we would protect more than 200 million people from the pain and disfigurement caused by diseases such as malaria. I was at a conference addressing this subject in Berlin last week. Dealing with antimicrobial resistance will play an integral part in ensuring that drugs remain effective and that the UK remains a world leader in tackling malaria.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is a well-travelled fellow.

T3. [901243] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The village of Khan al-Ahmar and its aid-funded school remain under the threat of demolition. The international community has stood by while other aid-funded structures have been demolished. When will action be taken—when will Israel be billed for the demolitions?

Alistair Burt: The UK continues to make representations on demolitions in the west bank and ensures that Israel understands the relationship between the UK and funding. We support efforts to bring to the notice of the Israeli authorities the legal arguments against demolitions, and we will continue to do so.

T5. [901245] Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Oxfam marked its 75-year anniversary earlier this month. I am proud of the work that British charities such as WaterAid, which was founded here in 1981, are doing around the world. Will the Minister outline what the Government are doing to support charities’ excellent work on campaigns for women and girls to have a safe and private place, as they come of age, to keep themselves clean?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, because DFID and Britain are working with many partners, including WaterAid. I pay tribute to this country’s great non-governmental organisations that provide wash and sanitation facilities for women and girls around the world, and protect their health and wellbeing. I pay tribute to what my hon. Friend and other Members are doing to work with them.
T4. [901244] Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): DFID is prioritising getting humanitarian aid to the Rohingya Muslim refugees in Bangladesh, but will the Secretary of State say what she is doing to ensure that priority is also given to medical aid, including the psychological therapies that will be desperately needed for those very damaged people?

Priti Patel: Of course, the medical aid and support that is going in is critical, because there are cases involving children, and parasites and diseases have really taken hold. Psycho-social care is now being put in place involving children, and parasites and diseases have really taken hold. Psycho-social care is now being put in place in which we have all been involved. The situation continues to deteriorate, and DFID and the Government continue to provide all the support that is needed. Through our aid match scheme, we are providing help directly to many of the charities, as well as contributing to the relief effort.

Mr Speaker: I call Tracy Brabin. Not here—another time.

T8. [901248] Deirdre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): A recent reply to a written question stated that nearly 11% of the aid budget is managed through the EU. Will the Secretary of State tell us what concrete plans she has to ensure that that money is properly used after Brexit?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is right to make a point that we make contributions through other organisations, particularly the European Union. After Brexit, we will ensure that that money is not only spent accountably and in a transparent way, but doing exactly what it is there to do: serving the world's poorest and providing relief to those people who desperately need that aid support.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Wc should rightly be proud of the enormous holistic contribution that the UK has made in responding to the Syria crisis, but what effort has been made in parallel? What credit does my right hon. Friend give to her Department's procurement programme for innovative, UK-built food aid drones?

Mr Fysh: Thank you, Mr Speaker. What access can my right hon. Friend give to her Department's procurement programme for innovative, UK-built food aid drones?

Priti Patel: Thank you my hon. Friend for highlighting the opportunity for DFID and the Government to use technology to provide much-needed food aid relief around the world, such as in refugee camps and crisis zones. Our procurement system has now changed. We are working with a range of suppliers to ensure that we can get the innovators to the Government to deliver the support that is needed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Khadija Arib, the President of the Dutch House of Representatives, is joining us in Parliament today. I know that colleagues will wish to extend the warmest of welcomes to my Dutch counterpart. I thank her for being here.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901211] Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 18 October.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that Members throughout the whole House will wish to join me in marking Anti-Slavery Day. Slavery is an abhorrent crime and I am determined to bring it to an end.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.
Ms McVey: Will the Prime Minister reaffirm her Government’s commitment to the northern powerhouse? Will she set out the specific schemes—\[\text{Interrupt.}\]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady has never been silenced and, as far as I am concerned, she never will be.

Ms McVey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The importance of the north will be heard.

Will the Prime Minister set out the schemes that she seeks to prioritise, and does she agree that the only norths that are in tune with the Leader of the Opposition’s political correctness and Marxism are Islington North and North Korea? \[\text{Interrupt.}\]

Mr Speaker: Order. We have 32 questions to get through and I want to hear the Prime Minister’s answer. I ask colleagues to contain themselves.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend referred to the voice of the north being heard, and it has indeed been heard by the Conservatives in government. It is a Conservative Government who committed—and remain committed—to the northern powerhouse, and it is a Conservative Government who are putting investment into skills and transport infrastructure for the northern powerhouse. We are backing business growth across the north, as I saw when I visited the north-west last week. We are putting £60 million into Transport for the North for looking at northern powerhouse rail; that is part of £13 billion of infrastructure investment. It is the Conservatives in government who recognise the importance of a country that works for everyone and of growth across the whole country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in recognising Anti-Slavery Day. The slave trade was one of the most grotesque times in the history of this planet and we must all be resolved to drive out slavery in any form whatsoever. I hope that the Prime Minister will join me in expressing sympathy to, and solidarity and support for, the people of Somalia following the horrific terrorist atrocity in Mogadishu last weekend.

I welcome today’s fall in unemployment—\[\text{Interrupt}\]—but the same figures show that real wages are lower today than they were 10 years ago. Most people in work are worse off. Does the Prime Minister really believe that falling wages are a sign of a strong economy?

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. Gentleman in expressing our concern about the terrible terrorist attack that took place in Mogadishu, killing nearly 300 people and injuring many hundreds. Terrorism in Somalia undermines the stability of the horn of Africa. We will continue to work with the international community to try to bring stability to Somalia and that part of Africa. Of course, an aspect of that involves dealing with the terrorist threat that people face there.

The right hon. Gentleman might have done a first in the House of Commons today, because I think this is the first time—certainly since I became Prime Minister—that he has actually welcomed a fall in unemployment. It is good news that more people are in work and that unemployment is at its lowest rate for more than 40 years. That means that people are taking more money in wages to their families.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the cost of living. I will tell him what we have done in relation to that. Some 30 million people have been given a tax cut that is worth £1,000 to a basic rate taxpayer every year. We have given the low-paid the highest pay increase for 20 years through the national living wage. For those who take the full entitlement, the doubling of free childcare is worth £5,000 per child per year to every family. That is what we are doing to help people with the cost of living.

Jeremy Corbyn: I wonder whether the Prime Minister could do a first—answer a question. The question I asked her was about falling wages. Christine, a worker in a village shop, wrote to me this week to say:

“I am worse off. I cannot afford to keep my car, which I struggled to buy, on the road. I need my car to attend appointments, job hunt for a better position, and take my son to activities. We don’t have a luxurious lifestyle and don’t want one. We just want to feel secure.”

When millions of workers are having to rely on the benefits system just to make ends meet, is not that a sign of not a strong economy, but a weak economy?

The Prime Minister: I have recognised since I came into this role that there are people in this country, like Christine, who are finding life difficult. That is why it is so important that the Government take steps to help people with the cost of living—the costs they find themselves facing week in, week out. It is why the measures that I just listed to the right hon. Gentleman, including tax cuts and the national living wage, are important, and it is why it is important that we have frozen fuel duty. We have ensured that we take some of the lowest paid people out of paying income tax altogether. We are going to introduce an energy price cap—\[\text{Interrupt}\] Yes. It is all about helping people with the cost of living, but you can only do that if you have a strong economy, and you only get a strong economy with a Conservative Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: People struggling to make ends meet; private sector rental evictions up; wages down; universal credit in a shambles. Is Christine wrong or is she just an example of what it is like to live in modern Britain?

Last week, I asked the Prime Minister to scrap the unfair charges on the universal credit helpline. Today she has finally bowed to that pressure, but the fundamental problems of universal credit remain: the six-week wait, rising indebtedness, rent arrears and evictions. Will the Prime Minister now pause universal credit and fix the problems before pressing ahead with the roll-out?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it is absolutely right—\[H\text{on. Members: “Hooray!”}\]

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Sit down now!

Mr Speaker: Order. I have said before to the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) that, as an aspiring stateswoman, she must conduct herself with due decorum. Calm—perhaps she is another Member who should take up yoga.
The Prime Minister: I suggest that Opposition Members listen to the whole sentence.

Yes, it is absolutely right that we have announced this morning that we will change the telephone charge. I said last week that we were listening to a number of proposals that have been made—we have done that. It is right to do this now because there is a lot of emphasis and a lot of publicity about universal credit at the moment, and I want people to know that they can ring in and get advice without being worried. That is exactly what we are going to do.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about universal credit and pausing it. Why have we introduced universal credit? It is a simpler system. It is a system that encourages people to get into the workplace. It is a system that is working, because more people are getting into work. Pausing universal credit will not help those people who would be helped by moving to universal credit, getting into the workplace and bringing home more pay for their families.

Jeremy Corbyn: There is a very long list of people urging the Prime Minister to pause universal credit, including Citizens Advice, the Trussell Trust, John Major and, I understand, two dozen of her own Back Benchers, who have a chance this afternoon to vote to pause universal credit and show that they are representing their constituents.

The public sector pay cap is causing real suffering and real staff shortages. Last week, the Health Secretary announced that the NHS pay cap was scrapped, but when asked if the NHS was going to get extra money to fund any agreed pay rise, he replied:

“That is something I cannot answer right now”.—[Official Report, 10 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 163.]

Well, this is right now, and the Prime Minister is here right now. How about an answer right now?

The Prime Minister: As I have explained to the right hon. Gentleman and the House in the past, the way in which we approach the whole question of public sector pay is through the work of the pay review bodies. They have all reported for the current year, and they did their work against the remit set by the Government of a blanket cap of 1% on public sector pay. For the 2018-19 year, we have changed that remit to ensure that there is flexibility in the system for that period.

Perhaps I could just explain something else to the right hon. Gentleman, because I fear that for all his years in Parliament there is one thing that he has failed to recognise—Government has no money of its own. Government gets money—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr MacNeil, you are becoming over-excitible again, young man. Calm yourself. There is no need for excessive gestulation; it serves no useful purpose whatsoever. Let us hear the Prime Minister’s reply. The Prime Minister will be heard, however long it takes.

The Prime Minister: Government has no money of its own. It collects money in taxes from businesses and people to spend on the NHS and on the services that people need. If businesses are not being set up, if businesses are not growing, and if people are not in work, Government does not have the money to spend on NHS pay, on schools, and on hospitals. Of course, the only way we ensure that those businesses are growing, and the only way we ensure that people are in jobs and that Government has the money to spend on schools and hospitals and NHS pay, is with a Conservative Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister seemed to have no problem finding £1 billion in a couple of days for the DUP. She needs to make it clear to the NHS workers what pay rise is being offered, when they will receive it, and what funding is being provided—and what cuts she is proposing to make elsewhere in order to deal with that.

Young people are in record levels of debt. This week, the Financial Conduct Authority warned of “a pronounced build-up of indebtedness amongst the younger age group” to fund “essential living costs”. Is not this yet another sign not of a “strong economy” but of a weak economy?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that we have heard from the OECD that the deficit that the Labour Government left us was unsustainable. Since then, we have indeed found money for the people of Northern Ireland. We have also found, as I explained earlier, £20 billion to give a tax cut to 30 million people and £38 billion to freeze fuel duty. That is about helping ordinary working people, day in and day out. When it comes to students and young people and their fear about debt, there is one thing we know, and that is that we should not be racking up debts today, like Labour proposes, that those young people would have to pay off tomorrow.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is very interesting that the Prime Minister talks about what happened 10 years ago. Her former friend George Osborne said earlier this week: “did Gordon Brown cause the sub-prime crisis in America? No.” He went on to say that “broadly speaking” the Government “did what was necessary in a very difficult situation”.

Under this Prime Minister, we have a weak economy. UK growth is currently the worst among the 10 largest EU economies. We are the only major economy where wages are lower today than they were 10 years ago. Even without the risks posed by this Government’s bungled Brexit negotiations—it is very interesting to see that the Home Secretary is necessary to keep the two protagonists apart—we now have weak growth, falling productivity, falling investment, and falling wages. How does the Prime Minister have the nerve to come here and talk about a “strong economy” when the figures show the exact opposite?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that the OECD says about the United Kingdom that we have the most efficient, accessible healthcare system, that fiscal sustainability has improved, that important steps have been taken to improve educational outcomes, and that jobs and earnings are good. That is what the OECD says about the strong economy under this Conservative Government. The way to get a weak economy is to borrow £500 billion like the Labour party is proposing. The way to get a weak economy is to ensure that you are promising spending after spending after spending and people are going to have to pay for that. The only way we get money to put into public
services, and the only way we can give people tax cuts to help them with the cost of living, is to ensure that we deal with the deficit, get our debts down, and deal with Labour’s great recession which put us into this position in the first place.

Q5. [901215] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Following the rather flaccid response from the Leader of the Opposition, may I welcome the announcement that the Government are scrapping the universal credit helpline charges—a move that demonstrates that the Government are supporting people who want to get up, work hard and get on in life? Can the Prime Minister now confirm that all welfare claim DWP helplines will be completely free to all claimants?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to confirm that, and it is useful to be able to do so. My right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary announced this morning that we have taken the decision to change the universal credit helpline to a freephone number. I can also tell my hon. Friend that by the end of the year, DWP will extend freephone numbers to all its phone lines. I think that that will be welcomed and will be helpful to all who use them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister do today what her Brexit Secretary was unable to do in this Chamber yesterday and rule out a no deal scenario on leaving the EU?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that what we are doing is working for the best possible deal for the United Kingdom, but it would be irresponsible of Government not to prepare for all possible scenarios, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Ian Blackford: May I point out to the Prime Minister what her Home Secretary said yesterday—that a no deal scenario is “unthinkable”? I agree with the Home Secretary. Brexit has contributed to a fall in the pound and a subsequent rise in inflation, squeezing household budgets. Folk are getting poorer in Britain today. It has been reported that Government analysis shows that Scotland and the north-east of England would lose out from breakfast—I mean Brexit—but the Government responded to an FOI by saying that such analysis—[Interruption.] Well, there is hilarity on the Government Benches—

Mr Speaker: Order. A Government Whip from Staffordshire is forgetting his manners. He is gesticulating rather noisily, and he should calm himself. Let us hear Mr Blackford.

Ian Blackford: Members on the Government Benches are engaging in hilarity, but the reality is that the people of this country are going to pay an economic price for a hard Brexit. The Government analysis, which has remained secret, points out that people in Scotland and the north-east of England will suffer from a hard Brexit. What is the Government’s analysis of the impact and what will be the impact—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the right hon. Gentleman has completed his question.

Ian Blackford indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: No? A last sentence, but it had better be very brief. The question has been far too long. Come on—quick, quick.

Ian Blackford: What is the Government’s analysis of the impact of Brexit on a no deal scenario?

The Prime Minister: Once again, the right hon. Gentleman stands up and talks about the Scottish economy and makes reference to issues such as jobs in Scotland. I am sorry that in his rather lengthy question he did not make any reference to the fact that since 2010, nearly a quarter of a million more people in Scotland are in work. That is the result of the actions of this Government.

Mr Speaker: Now we are going to hear Back Benchers. Back Benchers in this place must be heard.

Q10. [901221] Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As the Prime Minister pointed out in answer to the first question, the northern powerhouse initiative has done a great deal to help the economies of northern areas. But our coastal communities are desperately in need of further investment and support. In north-east Lincolnshire we have established a private sector-led project board that benefits from the expertise of its members, who include a former Chancellor and a former head of the civil service. Could the Prime Minister give her support to the initiative for a town deal for north-east Lincolnshire, which might provide a model for other areas?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this, and I recognise and understand that ambitious regeneration plans are being developed by the Greater Grimsby project board. I welcome that because it is based on a very strong private-public sector approach and partnership that is being put forward, and I know my hon. Friend is himself playing an active role in that. I believe there have been some positive meetings with my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary and my hon. Friend the Northern Powerhouse Minister, and I would encourage the board to continue engagement with officials about the details of their plans.

Q2. [901212] Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): At the general election, both main parties committed to an energy price cap and the Government have now published a Bill for which I believe there is strong cross-party support, so will the 14 million customers on standard variable tariffs actually see their energy prices come down this winter, and if not, when will the Prime Minister get on the statute book legislation to ensure that this is the last winter when customers can be ripped off by their energy company?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the fact that the hon. Lady says she and others on the Labour Benches will support the legislation that the Government have—[Interruption.] No, it was not. It is important that we
take action to deal with energy prices: the draft legislation will see those rip-off prices being capped for millions of households—all standard-tariff customers—and while this will initially run to 2020, we will be able to extend it on an annual basis until 2023, on the advice of Ofgem. I think we have sent an important message to the industry, which I would hope is actually going to make changes even before we get the legislation on the statute book.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does the Prime Minister share the great concerns that were expressed in this House yesterday, including by Ministers, about the implications for the one country, two systems principle in Hong Kong of the recent refusal of the authorities there to allow Ben Rogers, a UK national, entry? Will the Prime Minister confirm that the Government will work with the Hong Kong and Chinese authorities to ensure that the democratic freedoms in the one country, two systems principle are honoured and preserved?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we want to ensure that the principle of one country and two systems is preserved and continues to operate. On the specific case and the specific issue that she has raised, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary informs me that the Foreign Office has raised this issue at various levels in relation to Hong Kong and China, and we will continue to do so.

Q3. [901213] Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. People in my constituency, many of whom work at Vauxhall’s Ellesmere Port plant, are devastated by the announcement of 400 job losses this week. PSA stated that clarity on the UK’s future trading relationship with the EU was needed before the company would be in a position to consider future investment in Vauxhall. Cabinet Ministers have plenty to say to each other about Brexit, but what have the Government got to say to the 400 workers at Vauxhall Ellesmere Port, who face losing their jobs in the run-up to Christmas?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we never want to see people in the position of losing their jobs, and if people do lose their jobs, support is available to them through the DWP to help them to get back into the labour market and to get back into work. We are in the process of a negotiation on Brexit. We will leave the European Union in March 2019, and we are negotiating for the best possible deal we can get for the United Kingdom. We have also indicated that we want an implementation period after that deal has been negotiated to ensure that businesses do not face a cliff edge but can have certainty about the rules under which they are going to operate in the future. If there is one thing that is certain it is that we will leave the EU in March 2019.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Given that the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015 is now on the statute book—it is a very good piece of legislation—will the Prime Minister confirm that the community home building fund, available last year for group housing projects, is still available, and does she agree that providing service plots of land at scale is a good way to fix our broken housing market?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. I know that he has campaigned long and hard on the particular area of self-build and he course has a great deal of expertise in it. He is absolutely right: if we are going to fix our broken housing market, we do need to build more homes. That is why we have made bold proposals in our housing White Paper—to make more land available, to build homes faster and to give local authorities the tools they need. I had a roundtable with house builders and others earlier this week, looking at how we can ensure that we unlock the potential of our housing market. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary will be happy to discuss with him the very specific issues that he has raised.

Q4. [901214] Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Prime Minister, you said that universal credit is working. I wonder what you would say to my constituent, Fred, who claimed universal credit for a short time more than two years ago and has been working ever since, but suddenly got a letter in August demanding that he repay £366. Despite spending hours on the phone line, Fred was not told why he was being charged, and more than £100 a month was taken out of his wages, meaning that he incurred bank charges. Will you take personal responsibility so that no more claimants suffer injustice and debt, as Fred has?

Mr Speaker: I will take no responsibility for those matters myself, and the hon. Lady will be advised on the protocol, but the Prime Minister may wish to respond.

The Prime Minister: As I have indicated, changes have been made to the phone line. I repeat to the hon. Lady that the evidence shows that on universal credit, more people are getting into the workplace than on jobseeker’s allowance. Universal credit is about helping people get into the workplace and ensuring that, as they earn more, they keep more of what they earn. That is exactly what universal credit does.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the wonderful work at Twycross zoo in my constituency, breeding endangered species? Is she also aware of the critical problem of the demise of African elephants, which are being slaughtered at the rate of 20,000 a year? What will she do about banning ivory sales in London?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I commend those in his constituency who are doing that valuable work. Earlier this month, we set out proposals for a ban on ivory sales that we believe will put the UK front and centre of global efforts to end the trade in ivory. I am sure that Members across the House are concerned about that issue. Ivory should not be seen as a commodity for financial gain or a status symbol. I think our proposals will make a real difference.

Q6. [901216] Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Universal credit is not just a benefit for jobseekers; it is for people in work to subsidise their low pay, for carers and those who cannot work. My constituents have endured the brunt of austerity for many years. Now the Department for Work and
Pensions proposes to roll out the universal credit system in my constituency over Christmas—the toughest financial time for people. My question to the Prime Minister is this: is the roll-out a matter of gross incompetence or calculated cruelty?

The Prime Minister: The DWP has been rolling out universal credit. As it has done so, it has listened to the concerns that have been raised. I am pleased to say that we are seeing a much better performance from the DWP.

Laura Pidcock indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister: It is no good the hon. Lady shaking her head. The figures show that the performance in getting payments to people on time has improved substantially—more people are getting advance payments. We want to ensure that all those who need advance payments can get them. The fundamental reason for moving to universal credit—a simpler, more straightforward system—[Interruption.] The hon. Lady may not want to listen, but there is a reason for universal credit. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues know that I am determined to get through the list to help Back Benchers, but when questions are asked, the answers must be heard. Today is exceptionally noisy, and we are not setting a very good example to our Dutch friends. I am sure that they do it much better. The questions, and the Prime Minister’s answers, will be heard.

The Prime Minister: Finally, I would simply say to the hon. Lady that the purpose of universal credit is to have a more straightforward, simpler system that helps people to keep more as they earn more and encourages more people into work. That is what it does.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is great to have the Prime Minister back in her usual fine voice. Will she join me in encouraging Members, who have demonstrated what good voices they have, to hold events in their constituencies for Singing for Syrians? The situation on the ground in Syria gets ever more desperate, and I am sure that they do it much better. The questions, and the Prime Minister’s answers, will be heard.

The Prime Minister: I think we all recognise the desperate situation in Syria, which is why we continue to be proud of our country’s record of giving humanitarian aid to Syria and to refugees from Syria: £2.46 billion has been committed since 2012, our largest ever response to a humanitarian crisis. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in encouraging Members of this House to support the Singing for Syrians initiative and various events throughout the country. This is another important initiative focused, as is our humanitarian aid, on helping those people who are in a desperate situation in Syria.

Q7. [901217] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Notts fire service tells us that sprinklers save lives. Nottingham City Council plans to retrofit sprinklers in all its high rise blocks, but the Government will not provide a penny to support it. After Grenfell, the Prime Minister promised:

“We cannot and will not ask people to live in unsafe homes”—[Official Report, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 169.]

How safe would she feel living on the 20th floor of Pine View or Southchurch Court in my constituency with one staircase and no sprinklers?

The Prime Minister: Since Grenfell, much has been said in this House about sprinklers. There are a number of aspects that have to be looked at in relation to the safety of tower blocks. It is not the case that sprinklers are the only issue that needs to be looked at or addressed; nor is it the only solution to ensuring their safety. On expenditure by the hon. Lady’s local council, it is of course up to the council to make decisions about what it wishes to do. We have been very clear that discussions have taken place with the Department for Communities and Local Government and local authorities.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The mental health of our servicemen, servicewomen and their families is rightly gaining the attention it deserves. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the initiative begun by the Royal Foundation and the Ministry of Defence to ensure targeted support across the whole armed forces family?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to welcome the initiative to which my hon. Friend refers. We know we need to address mental health more carefully and with greater attention across the public in general, but mental health concerns for those in the armed forces and those who have left the armed forces are a very real challenge that we need to face, because they have put themselves on the line for us and we owe it to them.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend further agree that if Sir Teddy Taylor the country has lost an outstanding parliamentarian, a great constituency Member of Parliament and a true patriot? Does my right hon. Friend further agree that if Sir Teddy were alive today he would be delighted to learn that the outgoing Labour mayor of Southend, plus three unaligned councillors, have all joined the Conservative party?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in recognising the great contribution Sir Teddy Taylor made in his time in this House as a Member of Parliament for different seats, including Southend, although I have to say to my hon. Friend that one of my abiding memories of Sir Teddy is the number of times we had to evacuate Portcullis House because he had set the fire alarm off by smoking where he was not supposed to—in his office. I am very pleased to welcome the former Labour mayor and the unaligned councillors who have now
joined the Conservative party. We welcome them to the Conservative party and look forward to working with them.

Q9. [901220] Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Government failure to fund schools adequately is hurting children in my constituency. Lancashire schools will lose £40 million of funding and 828 teachers by 2020. Will the Prime Minister explain how this will help raise standards and aspirations?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the hon. Lady what is helping with standards and aspirations: first, the record funding that the Government are putting into our schools, and secondly, our reforms to the education system which mean already that over 150,000 children are at good or outstanding schools in her area, which is an increase of nearly 40,000 since 2010. More children are in good or outstanding schools—that is what the Government are providing.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Earlier this year, I opened a state-of-the-art manufacturing training facility at Braintree’s further education college. On Friday, I opened a new training centre for Contracts Support Services, a family-run business. Now that unemployment is at a record low and employment at a record high, will the Government commit to supporting both public and private sector trainers to increase productivity in the British economy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Increasing productivity is a key aim of our Government—it is very important for the economy and the future—and investing in skills is a key part of that. I am pleased to hear that he has been so active in opening new facilities in his constituency. The changes we are making—our support for FE colleges, the new T-level, the emphasis we are putting on technical education and the £500 million we are putting into it—will all help to increase the skills levels of young people in this country.

Q11. [901222] Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Trust for London’s latest property profile shows that levels of homelessness in Enfield have risen by 82% in the last two years alone and that the eviction rate is the highest in the capital. What hope can the Prime Minister give to those of my constituents who are in work in the capital. What hope can the Prime Minister give to those of my constituents who are in work in the capital? What hope can the Prime Minister give to those of my constituents who are in work in the capital?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the hon. Lady what is helping with standards and aspirations: first, the record funding that the Government are putting into our schools, and secondly, our reforms to the education system which mean already that over 150,000 children are at good or outstanding schools in her area, which is an increase of nearly 40,000 since 2010. More children are in good or outstanding schools—that is what the Government are providing.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Yesterday, the director general of MI5 said that internet companies had an ethical responsibility to deal with terrorist material online. The Prime Minister has previously indicated that if they do not meet this challenge she will consider regulation. Will she confirm that if regulations are necessary they will be robust and enforced?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. and learned Friend that confirmation, but there is work to be done before we get to that stage. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has done important work, for instance, with the tech companies, which have come together and formed a global forum looking at how to deal with terrorist material on the internet. It is a real issue that we need to address. I was pleased to hold an event on exactly this issue with President Macron and Prime Minister Gentiloni at the margins of the UN General Assembly this year attended by representatives of more than 70 countries and representatives of all the major tech companies. We need to work together, but I want those tech companies to recognise their social and moral responsibility to work with us to do something about this material.

Q12. [901223] John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister notice that I am wearing a red card in my pocket today? She will be aware that the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) is not in his place. Indeed, he is in Barcelona doing his other job—today of all days. What signal does she think this sends to hard-working members of the public who are expected to turn up for their day jobs or face sanctions?

Mr Speaker: Order. I trust that the hon. Gentleman notified the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) in advance of his intention to raise this question.

John McNally indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that confirmation.

The Prime Minister: Let me say to the hon. Gentleman that I think the constituents of Moray will be very pleased that they have a Conservative Member of Parliament who is looking after their interests in the House. Let me also say to him that the Scottish Conservative Members are doing more for the interests of Scotland in this Parliament than the Scottish nationalists have ever done. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Mr Spencer, what is the matter with you? My dear fellow! You eat home-produced food, you are a very respected farmer, and you are normally of a most taciturn disposition. I do not know what has come over you. Perhaps you should go and have a rest later. You must cheer up. Cheer up!

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Along with the Scottish National party, the Labour party has said that it will not accept no deal with the European Union in any circumstances. That means that Labour will pay whatever final bill the EU demands, and accept any conditions on which it insists. Does the Prime Minister agree that no one with even an ounce of common sense would enter into a negotiation making such an announcement in advance, and does she agree that the stance proposed by the Labour party and the SNP is not a negotiation, but a capitulation?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has put it very well indeed. We cannot enter the negotiations taking the stance that the Labour party and the SNP have
taken. As my hon. Friend says, their rejection of a “no deal” means that they would accept a deal at any price to the British taxpayer, whatever the damage it would do to our economy, and we will not do that.

Q13. [901224] Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): We are seeing the loss of skilled jobs at British Aerospace in Lancashire and more at Vauxhall in Ellesmere Port, as well as redundancies at Austin in Preston and Monarch in Manchester. What has happened to the northern powerhouse? Has its battery gone flat? If so, will the Prime Minister recharge it, as she rightly did in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), the Government are committed to the northern powerhouse, and, indeed, are putting money into it to encourage economic growth, particularly through our investment in infrastructure. The hon. Gentleman raised a number of cases, and the issue of Vauxhall was raised by one of his hon. Friends earlier. We are continuing to work with Vauxhall throughout the process to do all that we can to protect United Kingdom jobs, as we have done with BAE Systems and as we are doing with others. What matters, however, is ensuring that we have an economy that can enable more jobs to be created, and 3 million more people are in work today than in 2010.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Respectful and committed family relationships reduce poverty, improve wellbeing, and help the Government to live within their means. They are a key part of a country that works for everyone. Will the Prime Minister therefore implement the proposals of the recently published family manifesto?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are, of course, looking into what more we can do to ensure that we see those stable families, which lead to the benefits that he has described. He has campaigned on this issue since he came to the House, and I welcome the valuable contributions that he has made.

Mr Speaker: Last but never forgotten: Mr Dennis Skinner.

Q14. [901225] Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister aware that INEOS, the fracking company, has been accused of creating a massive deterioration in the water supply, run by Severn Trent, on the Oxcroft estate in the Bolsover area? Will she, as Prime Minister, investigate this matter, and call on INEOS to halt the process while the investigation takes place?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the issue will be properly looked into, but underlying it is the question of ensuring that we are able to have a secure and safe supply of energy in the future. That is why the fracking is continuing, and that is why we are supportive of the Shell gas exploration. There are opportunities there for the United Kingdom. As I have said, however, I am sure that the specific issue raised by the hon. Gentleman will be looked into appropriately.
Regulation of Property Agents

12.50 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): With permission, I shall make a statement on a call for evidence on protecting consumers in the letting and management agents market.

When our housing White Paper was published in February we committed to taking action to help people already on the property ladder or living in rented accommodation. The Prime Minister has also announced billions of pounds of funding for new affordable homes, including homes for rent. We are also taking action to create a fairer property management system that works for everyone. We have already announced plans to regulate letting agents, including banning fees for tenants, and we have made it clear that we want to see an end to the unjustified use of leasehold in new-build houses.

The time has come to address service charges. As the number of leasehold and private rented homes has grown, the market for managing agents has boomed. According to one estimate, annual service charges alone now total as much as £3.5 billion. While these managers provide an important service, the system in which they work is simply not suited to the modern age. Tenants and leaseholders—even some freeholders on new-build estates—hand over their money and receive services in return, but have little or no say over which agent provides them or at what cost. This matters because, while the majority of agents are honest professionals committed to delivering a high standard of service, a near total lack of regulation has led to the growth of a market where in places standards and safety come second to the pursuit of profit.

We have seen reports of broken windows being repaired with cardboard and sticky tape and of damp and mould simply being painted over. One landlord was billed £500 by his agent for repairing a shower door, while a group of leaseholders were charged 10 times the market rate to have a new fire escape fitted, with the £30,000 contract for the work being handed to the property owner’s brother.

People do not need any qualifications, training or experience to call themselves an agent. They do not need a criminal records check. They do not even have to contract for the work being handed to the property manager. Some experts believe such agents are overcharging landlords, renters and leaseholders—evidence which outlines the challenges facing the sector.

To deliver a high standard of service, a near total lack of regulation has led to the growth of a market where in places standards and safety come second to the pursuit of profit.

Today, we are setting out plans for fixing the problems in property management. We are publishing a call for evidence which outlines the challenges facing the sector, proposes some possible solutions, and asks for the views of the people who know the market best, from those who work in it to those who pay the service charges.

As part of this new call for evidence, the Government are seeking views on three key elements: first, whether regulatory overhaul of the sector is needed; secondly, measures to protect consumers from unfair costs and overpriced service charges; and, thirdly, ways to place more power in the hands of consumers by giving leaseholders more say over who their agent is.

The sector has done some good work to raise standards already, but there is more to do to professionalise the sector and root out poor practice, and through the call for evidence we will take views on whether we need an independent regulator to oversee property management.

So today the Government are asking everyone who pays service charges and everyone who receives them to share their views on what is wrong and how we can fix it. We want to give power back to consumers, give agents a clear and consistent framework to operate in, and give landlords, renters and leaseholders the confidence they need to know that agents are complying with the rules.

As we build more homes, we need the right people to take care of them. That is why it is important that the Government act to recognise what works in the sector and fix what does not. Today’s announcement is about delivering better value and services for tenants, leaseholders, and hard-working people across the country.

The call for evidence will be open for six weeks and is the first step in creating a property management system that works for everybody. I commend this statement to the House.

12.55 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): My goodness, the Government really are now scraping the bottom of the barrel: an oral statement on a call for evidence about property managing agents—not a statement on the Grenfell Tower fire and why four months on only 14 of 200 surviving families yet have a new permanent home, on bold Government action in the face of home ownership hitting a 30-year low, on rough sleeping doubling, or on the lowest level of new affordable house building for 24 years.

More than 80 Members on both sides of the House want to speak next in Labour’s debate on universal credit, yet the House is being held up by the Minister telling us he wants to “create a fairer property management system that works for everyone.”

If Mr Speaker were a football referee, he would book the Minister for time wasting. Where is the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) when he is needed?

In the face of the country’s housing crisis, this is a truly feeble statement. It is not even a commitment to act; it is a commitment to ask some questions. The Government are launching today, the Minister tells us, “a call for evidence”. He tells us that he is seeking views on “whether regulatory overhaul of the sector is needed”.

Of course it is: managing and letting agents can set up shop for a small fee, with no expertise, no qualifications, no registration and no professional body membership. This is a market with no legal regulation, just partial self-regulation. It is a market in which the reputation of the best is dragged down by the worst, and a market in which consumers too often face unfair upfront fees, restrictions on what they can do to their own homes, and a system in which it proves impossible to get problems sorted out.

Better regulation of letting and managing agents has long been a commitment on this side of the House, so the Government’s concern now is welcome, but action needs legislation. Therefore, can the Minister confirm when the proposed legislation will be introduced, and when it will come into force? Can he confirm that this “call for evidence” today will not delay still further the announcement the Government made a year...
We are doing a huge amount of work. Consulted on incentives to landlords for longer tenancies. Be part of a redress scheme and housing courts being private rented sector with landlords being required to announce a few weeks ago on measures to help the right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made an announcement that all landlords must meet before they rent their homes. We have a big housing crisis and small thinking from Conservative Ministers. After seven years of failure on all fronts on housing, when will Ministers come to the House and announce a proper plan to fix this country’s housing crisis?

Alok Sharma: I have not said this before, but I have enormous respect for the right hon. Gentleman. However, I am extremely sorry that he started his response to the statement with such rancour. There are 4.5 million households renting in the private sector. For them, this absolutely matters—it really does—so I hope he will reflect on how he started his contribution and on the fact that perhaps what we ought to be doing is working together on making this happen. He says we should do it. Of course, and that is precisely what we are doing, but I say respectfully that he was the Housing Minister—why did he not do it?

Let me talk about fixing the broken housing market. The right hon. Gentleman said that we are tinkering. We are not tinkering. He will have seen the work that has been done since the White Paper was published and he knows the announcements that have been made. I recommend to him that, instead of talking to his colleagues in the Labour party, he talks to the social housing sector to ask what it makes of the announcements made at the Conservative party conference—the £2 billion extra and CPI plus 1%. It will tell him that those announcements were a sea change.

I also say to the right hon. Gentleman that, in the work that we are doing, there is finally some joined-up thinking in Government. We have already announced—I am pleased he welcomes this—the ban on tenant fees from letting agents. We will publish the draft Bill very shortly, together with the consultation. He knows that, when it comes to rogue landlords, it has been possible since April to levy civil penalties of up to £30,000, and we are also looking at banning orders. A range of work is ongoing.

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Alok Sharma: I recognise that the devolved Administrations, including Scotland, have done work in that area, but this is a call for evidence and it is open to everyone to give their views. That is what we want—a comprehensive call for evidence. I do talk to the Scottish Housing Minister fairly regularly.

Mr Charles Walker (Brockxburne) (Con): Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the three deposit protection schemes and of Shelter to discuss how we can better protect tenant deposits and put tenants in the driving seat when it comes to choosing the scheme that looks after their deposit?

Alok Sharma: Yes, I absolutely will. I know that my hon. Friend has a great deal of knowledge of and experience in this area.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): When the Select Committee last looked at the issue of the arrangements for the regulation of letting agents, we recommended, simply as a first step, that letting and managing agents should be “subject to the same regulation that currently governs sales agents.” The Government response at the time was that this would “impose a new burden on local authorities, increase costs for consumers”.

I welcome the Government’s change of heart, but that Select Committee report was published in 2013—four years ago. A consultation has been proposed, but today we want and need to know when we are going to have some action. Will the Minister commit today to act by a given date on the results of the consultation?

Alok Sharma: I am grateful that the Chairman of the Select Committee has welcomed this call for evidence. I hope that it demonstrates that we are open. He and his Committee should put forward any evidence that they have. As he knows, the consultation will last six weeks, finishing at the end of November. Once we have all the information in from the consultees, we will respond as quickly as we can.

Anna Soubry (Brexhove) (Con): Rip-off merchants, cowboys and those who seek to exploit often some of the most vulnerable people in our society have no place in a modern Britain, but does my hon. Friend agree that we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater? Lots of agents are thoroughly respectable and good—invariably estate agents who are small, independent, family-run businesses occupying important plots on our high streets. It is important that we do not destroy their businesses, but at the same time ensure that we have a proper system.

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, but I point out to her that support for regulation and the call for evidence has been welcomed by the Association of Residential Managing Agents, the Association of Residential Letting Agents, the National Landlords Association, the Residential Landlords Association and the Institute of Residential Property Management. Those are credible organisations, and they are calling for reform.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Far from what the hon. Member for Broxburne (Mr Walker) said, will the Minister have another look at the role of tenancy deposits and the way certain agents do not carry through their legal obligation to ensure that the money is safe? Will he ensure that landlords do not hold money back for ridiculous repair jobs that have nothing to do with the tenants? That is both unfair and a real slur as to how tenants have their money handled.

Alok Sharma: I am sorry if I was not clear, but I will meet my hon. Friend for Broxburne to discuss precisely those matters. We will of course keep this in mind.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Sorting out service charges once and for all for means sorting out the section 20 process. Will the Minister update the House on his Department’s work on that?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to write to my hon. Friend and set out the details on that. More broadly, she should put forward whatever thoughts she has in the call for evidence and we will of course take them very seriously.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) to circulate her text book on succinct questions. It would be of great benefit to colleagues.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My constituents trapped in rip-off leasehold houses now look forward to swift action from the Government following the consultation that has just closed. Turning to this statement, more and more new estates are subject to management fees because developers are not transferring responsibility for common parts to local authorities. Will the new consultation examine ways of requiring developers to pass on those maintenance functions, which should properly be the responsibility of councils?

Alok Sharma: This is a call for evidence, and right hon. and hon. Members and others should put forward any evidence they have.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): One good way of placing more power in the hands of consumers is to establish and support more mutual housing co-operatives, which work well in Germany and place real power in residents’ hands. Will the Minister consider steps to encourage the establishment of more such co-operatives here?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss such matters. He knows a great deal about housing, particularly custom-building.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I declare an interest in that I own a property in Rochdale that is managed by an agent. Clamping down on rogue property agents is long overdue, and the consultation is welcome. However, whether regulatory reforms are successful will be entirely down to how well they are enforced. Self-regulation has failed, and local enforcement on the ground is under severe pressure due to public sector cuts. Will the Minister confirm that extra funding will be made available to make the necessary enforcement possible?

Alok Sharma: We have already made £12 million available to local authorities for enforcement since 2012. As I said in the statement, local authorities are able to
levy penalties of up to £30,000 on rogue landlords and that money can be used for further enforcement.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have an interest in the register. No matter how welcome the proposals, the Minister will agree that his proposals for vastly increasing the supply will be a much more effective defender of tenants’ interests.

Alok Sharma: As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The measures will of course help, but at the end of the day we need to fix the broken housing market by building more homes.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s statement. Will the Department also consider what steps can be taken to protect the consumer rights of freeholders who pay management fees on new-build estates where managing agents are failing to deliver value for money, such as in Lawley Village in Telford?

Alok Sharma: Yes. We will, of course, consider all these matters in the round, but if my hon. Friend puts her thoughts forward as part of the call for evidence, we will review them.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, which I co-chair along with the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), will be grateful for the Minister’s remarks. We will submit more evidence.

I put it to the Minister that it will be quite important for people to be able to submit their evidence to the consultation confidentially. There are so many crooks and dodgy people around that there may be threats of legal action, such as the one I received from Carter-Ruck on behalf of Barry Weir when I was looking after a park home resident. Ordinary people cannot face that; Members of Parliament can.

Will the Minister also consider whether Dudley Joiner of Team Property Management can properly remain in his role, or to whether the chairman of LEASE—the leasehold defender of tenants’ interests—can properly remain in his role, or whether it would be better to let him retire and have him replaced?

Alok Sharma: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. He and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) have done brilliant work as co-chairs of the APPG. He talks about people being able to give information anonymously, and we will of course not release the individual names of those who give evidence when the consultation’s outcome is published.

As for the two references to particular individuals made by my hon. Friend, I suggest that we speak about those other matters after this debate.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): In the 17 years that I have represented residents, both as a councillor and as an MP, this is easily one of the biggest issues that they have faced. Leaseholders are being ripped off left, right and centre, and the only defence is the right to manage. The best case scenario is that it is a complex process, but it is more often near impossible. Through the consultation, I hope that the Minister will prioritise empowering those residents who have suffered long enough.

Alok Sharma: As I said, we will publish the outcome of the leasehold consultation, but we will clearly be considering proposals to ban leasehold houses and, of course, to tackle onerous ground rents.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Leaseholders in Kettering will warmly welcome the launch of the Government’s consultation, particularly those who live in blocks of flats where multiple leasehold interests are involved. I am thinking in particular of a block in the middle of Kettering that is in an appalling state of disrepair and has become a magnet for crime. The leaseholders there have no possibility of selling their properties, so the Government’s announcement of proposals in this area will be warmly welcomed.

Alok Sharma: I welcome my hon. Friend’s comments. He refers to the power of leaseholders more generally, but I point out to him that we would also like to reinvigorate commonhold.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): There is anger in Newark that the common areas and public spaces around almost every freehold property built in and around the town by major developers are subject to a management charge. As other Members have pointed out, such charges essentially mean that the community has to pay two council tax bills in perpetuity. National developers are profiting from the scam, and councils do not have the power to resist it. I am pressuring the local council to resist it—I think it actually enjoys the arrangement because it benefits from it—but we need to give councils powers so that local MPs such as me can say that the practice is unacceptable and has to stop.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. We will, of course, reflect on that matter when we respond to the leasehold consultation.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Is my hon. Friend able to reassure the House that any clampdown on excess service charges will not have an adverse impact on rents?

Alok Sharma: When we talk about the ban on letting agents’ fees and making the system fairer, the industry has talked about an increase in rents as a possible impact, but that did not come to pass in Scotland. We want to introduce fairness across the system, and I hope that that will ultimately mean lower charges and lower fees for tenants.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It cannot be right that those who visit a property agent to rent enter into an area of high regulation, but there is no protection for those who go to the very same agent to rent. Does the Minister agree that today’s announcement levels the playing field for homeowners on the one hand and tenants and leaseholders on the other?

Alok Sharma: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s statement, but I urge him to widen its brief to the practices of housing associations. In recent weeks, constituents of North Dorset have been to see me after their housing associations increased charges without any prior notice and certainly with no justification.

Alok Sharma: The call for evidence relates to the private rented sector, but we will be putting out a Green Paper on the social housing sector and we will consider such matters.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s statement, which many residents in my constituency will also welcome. More and more freeholders are subject to charges, so will he confirm that any new regulations will include the freehold market? Does he agree that a lack of transparency is at the heart of the issue? If so, will he ensure that any new regulations provide complete transparency for those who pay service charges?

Alok Sharma: We are all for transparency. As I have said, we will consider all the matters put forward as part of this call for evidence and in previous leasehold consultations.

BILLS PRESENTED

Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)
Secretary Chris Grayling, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Secretary Lidington, Secretary Greg Clark and Secretary David Mundell, presented a Bill to make provision about automated vehicles and electric vehicles.

Bill read the First Time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 112) with explanatory notes (Bill 112-EN).

Smart Meters Bill
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)
Secretary Greg Clark, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Chris Grayling and Secretary Sajid Javid, presented a Bill to extend the period for the Secretary of State to exercise powers relating to smart metering and to provide for a special administration regime for a smart meter communication licensee.

Bill read the First Time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 113) with explanatory notes (Bill 113-EN).

Workers (Definition and Rights)
Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.19 pm
Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the definition of worker; to make provision about workers’ rights; and for connected purposes.

My last ten-minute rule motion, on free telephone calls to Department for Work and Pensions helplines, has today been made Government policy, so it is appropriate that I ask leave to bring in a Bill to define the status of workers in law; to refine the current definitions in light of recent Supreme Court judgments; and to provide greater protection from day one of a person’s employment, eliminating zero-hours contracts and providing greater protection for those in precarious work, such as in the hospitality sector.

For too many years, workers’ rights were rarely debated outside of trade union conferences, but since the 2008 crash, when the failures of big business landed the least well off taxpayers with the bill for the corporate gamblers and their reckless handling of the global economy, there has been a growing sense of outrage that hard work is not properly rewarded.

Far from addressing an unbalanced economy that rewards failure so long as it is on a global scale, the Government have clung to the supremacy of the market over workers’ rights. However, all the evidence shows that a healthy economy values workers and that achieving the correct balance between profit and reward is the biggest spur to long-term growth instead of short-term profit.

Many voices are now challenging the sheer scale of exploitation and poor working practices that all age groups experience but that often hit young people the hardest. I commend the private Member’s Bill tabled by my comrade, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). The Unpaid Trial Work Periods (Prohibition) Bill would make it clear that, if a trial period is offered, the employer must pay up for that period whether or not a full offer of employment is made.

In many ways, there is a false narrative about the modern world of work that suggests that 21st-century technology has created a different dynamic and that workers have to adapt to be more flexible and more open to different ways of working, leaving behind outdated notions of security and guaranteed reward. The clear implication is that full-time secure employment with rights, a pension and clearly defined hours is an outdated 20th-century concept, instead of the peak of a hard-fought struggle to redress the balance between employer and employee—or, at its most extreme, exploiter and exploited. I make no apology for putting the issue in stark terms. We need to stand up and take on the siren voices that want to cloud a simple issue that has existed for as long as one person has agreed to pay another for their work. If fairness is not nailed down in legislation and enforced, there will always be employers who push their advantage to the limit and beyond.

I strongly believe the time has come for a full debate about what is fair work and how it should be properly rewarded. My Bill would bring some clarity to the...
definition of “worker” by defining what rights are available and consolidating a single statutory definition of the people to whom employment rights and duties apply. It would also give the House the opportunity for more debate about the issues currently being explored by Committees following the Taylor report.

The Taylor report is useful in one sense: workers’ rights are front and centre. With Brexit on the horizon, we should all be aware of how easily the rights we take for granted could disappear. The report correctly identifies that clarity in the law could be improved, but I take issue with the proposed solutions, particularly that of creating a new category of worker—“dependent contractor.” I have a strong sense that the Taylor report’s main focus is not primarily the worker. It gives more weight to the interests of consumers and employers; when Mr Taylor gave evidence in Committee his responses indicated an anxiety that nothing should be introduced that “harmed” or “affected” consumers and employers in a negative way, even if it improves workers’ rights.

Mr Taylor admitted that his report was influenced by the Treasury submission on costs. He also admitted that if he had known that the Supreme Court was going to rule against the Government on employment tribunal fee costs, he would have been more robust in his report on the case for abolishing those costs. That was quite a revelation about how the report was produced—“nothing too radical” was evidently the starting point. There was quite a contradiction when he said that good businesses should not fail because other businesses are prepared to run a more profit-driven, exploitative model, but the report proposes no concrete legislative changes or enforcement to support companies that undertake good practice.

One of the more puzzling aspects of the report and Mr Taylor’s evidence was the stress on the importance of empowering workers through access to information and advice without once acknowledging the role of trade unions. In many respects, the choice of employers and advice without once acknowledging the role of trade unions—and whether they would happily vote for their reintroduction. However, I believe that is a minority viewpoint.

The time has come to secure legislation that uses the court judgments to clarify the nature and status of workers today. We should not overcomplicate the issue by pretending that the age-old struggle between labour and capital has magically vanished in the digital age. The Conservative party is not, and never will be, the party of the workers, despite the good intent adhered to by one or two well-meaning Members. During the passage of the Trade Union Act, in which I participated, the true intent and nature of Government policy was revealed and written into Hansard for all to see. I wonder whether the crackdown on workers’ rights goes far enough for some Members, who look fondly on 18th and 19th-century employment legislation—namely, the Master and Servant Acts designed to discipline employees and repress the combination of workers in trade unions—and whether they would happily vote for their reintroduction. However, I believe that is a minority viewpoint.

The time has come for an Act of Parliament to address the issue of precarious work, and I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Chris Stephens, Neil Gray, Mhairi Black, Grahame Morris, Ruth George, Deidre Brock, Tommy Sheppard, Albert Owen, Kirsty Blackman, Jonathan Edwards, Kelvin Hopkins and Mr Alistair Carmichael present the Bill.

Chris Stephens accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018, and to be printed (Bill 114).

Mr Speaker: 19 January is a splendid day, my birthday.
Debbie Abrahams: This is a real test for the Government; if there is a genuine desire to make life better for everybody across the country, UC is a key way in which we can respond. I am so sorry to hear about the issues in Newcastle as a consequence of the introduction of UC.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I can report to my hon. Friend that I have had exactly the same experience in my constituency, where people are being driven into destitution by the waits for UC. The local food bank, alongside the citizens advice bureau, has estimated that if this full roll-out goes ahead just six weeks before Christmas, leaving everybody destitute for Christmas day, it will have to collect 15 tonnes of extra food to deal with the demand that will be generated by these changes.

Debbie Abrahams: This is the reality that people are facing; this is happening in the areas my colleagues have mentioned, and our concern is that, as this is rolled out to 55 areas this month, the situation will get even worse.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I was a member of the DWP RTI issues group, so there are clearly still problems. The reliability and validity of this data is a direct consequence of this system. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister’s attitude at the start, there were a number of serious design flaws, which the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I was a member, raised in 2012. They included, first, the fact that UC applications would be “digital by default”; in other words, applications could only be made online. There are still several issues with that, not least the assumption that everyone is computer-literate or has ready access to getting online. We all remember the scene in “I, Daniel Blake” where somebody who had not used a computer before was trying to do so, and we saw the real stress and difficulties he found.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I was a member of the DWP RTI issues group, so there are clearly still problems.
Finally, the Government said that disabled people would not be financially worse off under UC, but because the severe disability premium payment has not been incorporated into UC, it is an effective loss of up to £62.45 a week for a single person—more than £3,200 a year.

All that was in 2012, but a number of other issues emerged in the following couple of years—universal jobmatch, ballooning costs and of course several delays. One of the most worrying issues revealed in the January 2015 UC regulations was that people in low-paid work on UC will now be subject to in-work conditionality. So, for example, someone who is one of 1 million or so people working on a low-paid, zero hours contract, with different hours from one week to the next, will have to demonstrate to their Jobcentre Plus adviser that they are trying to work 35 hours a week and if they fail to do that to that person’s satisfaction, they can and will be sanctioned. For Members who are unfamiliar with this concept, those people will have their social security payments stopped for a minimum of a month.

Fast forwarding to the 2015 summer Budget, the then Chancellor announced that cuts would be made to the so-called universal credit work allowances, which are how much someone can earn before UC support starts to be reduced. For example, a couple with two children claiming housing costs had their work allowances cut from £222 a month to £192 a month. In addition, approximately 900,000 families with more than two children could not receive support for third or subsequent children.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) rose—

Debbie Abrahams: I am not going to give way again, as 90 people have put in to speak.

The UC equivalent of the family element in tax credits was also abolished. The Government’s equality analysis showed that women and people from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities will be most adversely affected by these work allowances cuts. Let us recall what the principles of UC were and then consider that the Institute for Fiscal Studies stated at the time that the cuts to work allowances meant the principle of making sure work always pays was lost. The Government’s claim that UC is leading to more people getting into work is misleading, as it is based on 2015 data, before the work allowance cuts came into effect.

The current Chancellor’s attempt to redress some of the damage of these cuts by reducing the UC taper rate in last year’s autumn statement has had a marginal effect. Members may recall that he reduced the rate from 65% to 63%, so that for every £1 earned over the work allowance, 63p of UC support is withdrawn. That is a far cry from the 55p rate envisaged when UC was first being developed. On that basis, the Resolution Foundation estimated that some families will lose £2,600 a year because of these cuts.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry but I am not going to give way again, as I need to make progress, with 90 people having put in to speak.

This summer, the Library analysis that I commissioned showed the real-terms impacts on different family structures and for different income groups. It found that a single parent with two children working as a full-time teacher will be about £3,700 a year worse off in 2018-19 compared with 2011-12.

So where are we up to now? The most recent statistics show that there are currently about 600,000 people claiming UC, over a third of whom are receiving support via the full service. The roll-out of UC over the next six months will see the overall case load rise to just under 1 million, which is a 63% increase. On average, 63,000 people a month may start a new UC claim before January 2018, and by 2022 we expect about 7 million people to be seeking support from the programme. We are at a turning point in the Government’s flagship programme, the roll-out of which is currently being ramped up dramatically.

On top of the design flaws and cuts that I have just mentioned, several other issues have emerged. Perhaps the most pressing is the Government’s decision to make new claimants wait six weeks before they receive any support. Four weeks of that is to allow universal credit to be backdated, plus there is an additional week, as policy, and then a further week waiting for payment to arrive. This “long hello”, as some have called it, is believed to be one of the primary drivers of the rising debt and arrears we are now seeing. Citizens Advice reports that 79% of indebted claimants have priority debts such as a rent or council tax, putting them at greater risk of eviction, visits from bailiffs, being cut off from energy supplies and even prison.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry, but I will not.

Half those in rent arrears under universal credit report that they entered into arrears after they made their claim. What is worse is that many claimants do not even receive support within the Government’s lengthy six-week deadline: one in four are waiting for longer than six weeks and one in 10 are waiting for more than 10 weeks. The Government’s so-called advance payment, which is meant to be available to those in need, is in fact a loan that has to be paid back within six months out of future social security payments. I recognise and welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement about speeding that up, but I will explain later in my speech exactly what we might need to tweak.

As we have heard, the measures I have outlined are pushing people into debt, rent arrears and even homelessness. Last year, the National Housing Federation warned that approximately 80% of tenants on universal credit were in rent arrears, with the six-week delay being attributed as the key cause. A few weeks ago, a nurse came into my surgery. She was a single mum who had transferred from tax credits to universal credit. She had the six-week wait, and as a result the arrears racked up. When she came to see me, she had just been served an eviction notice. As universal credit is rolled out, such stories will become more and more common.

The Mayor of Greater Manchester has warned that rough sleeping will double over the winter if the universal credit roll-out continues without its fundamental flaws being addressed. This is not scaremongering; it is based
on estimates by local authorities in which universal credit has already been rolled out. Throughout Greater Manchester, the average arrears for people on UC in social housing is £824, compared with £451 for non-UC tenants. It is already having an impact on rising evictions and homelessness—and that is without even going into what is happening in the private rented sector. In addition, the increase in rent arrears for social housing landlords means that less money is available for investment in housing-stock maintenance or the building of new social housing, thereby adding to the existing housing crisis.

The increase in food bank use is another consequence of universal credit delays. Earlier this year, the Trussell Trust reported that referrals for emergency food parcels were significantly higher in a UC area, at nearly 17%, compared with the national average of just under 7%. The trust’s report also highlighted the impacts on the mental health of people on UC, who were described as stressed, anxious or depressed, as they worried about being unable to pay bills and falling into debt.

Who is most likely to be affected and why? Single parents are particularly vulnerable under universal credit. There are now 65,000 single parents on UC. Gingerbread has described how, through "error in administration and the structure of the system itself, single parents have been threatened with eviction and jobs have been put at risk".

Gingerbread told me about Laura, who lives with her two sons, one of whom is severely disabled. Laura had to apply for universal credit when her temporary contract at work ended. She had to wait eight weeks for support, and visited a food bank to feed her children. She was not told about advance payments and was struggling with rent arrears. Reflecting on her experience, Laura said:

"it’s very stressful, single parents quite often have enough stress and worry about money; and other things, bringing up your children to start with and it’s exacerbated by this very unfair, very unjust system”.

With child poverty among single parents forecast to increase sharply to 63% by the end of the Parliament, it is vital that we fix the social security system to ensure that it is working. In a forthcoming Child Poverty Action Group report analysing the cumulative effects of social security changes on child poverty since 2010, the section on universal credit highlights its design issues and, in particular, the detrimental impact on single parents. It states:

"Universal credit was designed to be more generous to couples than single people, with lone parents in particular expected to lose out compared with tax credits. This was a deliberate reaction to the decision, within tax credits, to boost support for lone parents. It states:

"seven different premiums with a simpler, two-tier system that focuses support on the most severely disabled people who are least able to work”.

However, subsequent social security changes, particularly the abolition of the UC limited-capability-for-work element from April 2017, have meant that, instead of a net gain, it is likely that there will be a net reduction of support for people with health conditions and disabilities.

Under this Government, we are seeing unprecedented cuts in support to disabled people, with the consequence that more and more disabled people are living in poverty. The number currently stands at more than 4.2 million; this cannot go on. This is exactly what the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities said is causing a “human catastrophe”.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The last time that the Leader of the Opposition spoke on this issue, he made a series of entirely unsubstantiated factual claims about housing in Gloucester. Are these further unsubstantiated claims?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order and it is an abuse of our proceedings. I strongly counsel the hon. Gentleman not to make the same foolish mistake again.

Debbie Abrahams: I wonder how that intervention will be seen by those people affected by these issues. Some 900,000 working-age adults will be pushed into poverty, while 900,000 children and 800,000 adults will be living in severe poverty.

Earlier, I mentioned the design issues that are affecting disabled people. This week, I heard from someone who has lost nearly £80 a week—a week—because of their transfer to universal credit after they moved house, ending their ESA claim. When UC was first launched, the Government said they wanted to “simplify the current complex rules which have been prone to error and complex and confusing for disabled people” and to replace “seven different premiums with a simpler, two-tier system that focuses support on the most severely disabled people who are least able to work”.

The self-employed are another group who are adversely affected by the Government’s changes to universal credit. We have seen a dramatic increase in self-employed people in recent years: they now make up 15% of the workforce—5 million in total—and account for 80% of the increase in employment since 2008. But 45% of them pay themselves less than the living wage.
As I have said many times, it is absolutely right that we try to design a social security system that can properly support self-employed people and that recognises the fluctuating nature of the labour market for those workers. Sadly, universal credit no longer does so, after the introduction of the minimum income floor, which is an assumed income for self-employed people, found by multiplying the minimum wage on the assumption that self-employed people are working 35 hours a week. One self-employed recipient who contacted me said:

“This system does not allow for the fluctuations in income that are experienced by the self-employed. Surely an assessment made on a year’s profits would be much fairer.”

They went on to say that universal credit will close down enterprise as a route to employment.

Importantly, the Department for Work and Pensions does not average incomes over a year, which leads to issues around holidays, such as Christmas, when the self-employed may take time off. They will be punished for doing so under the Government’s universal credit system. The Federation of Small Businesses has also expressed concerns, saying that it expects major problems for low-income self-employed people to set in at Christmas.

We need to build a social security system fit for the 21st century and to make sure that all workers, employed or self-employed, are afforded dignity and security as work demands fluctuate. We cannot allow the devastating impacts of universal credit roll-out to happen. I reiterate my genuine offer to work with the Government to address the very real concerns about universal credit, particularly its design flaws, the administrative issues and the cuts.

I welcome the Government’s announcement this morning that the so-called helpline will now be a Freephone line. Given Serco’s appalling performance over the past few years and the profit that it has made from the Government contract, it should be paying for the Freephone lines. It is unacceptable that people on the lowest incomes have been paying money that they do not have on phone calls to find out about their claims.

Action must be taken to improve call handler capacity and competence, so that people making inquiries on their claim are not kept on hold or passed from pillar to post. Another key ask is for alternative payment arrangements to be offered to all claimants at the time of their claims. That includes ending the one-week wait and enabling people to have fortnightly, instead of monthly, payments where appropriate with the option of the housing element to go directly to the landlord. Alternative arrangements have already been made available in Northern Ireland and will be introduced in Scotland, so there is no reason why they also should not be available to people in England and Wales.

We need to look at the advanced payments and make them more manageable. A repayment over six months is still creating huge issues for people on the lowest income.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry, but I will not give way.

These are relatively straightforward suggestions. I recognise that reinstating the original level of work allowances and reducing taper rates are less so, but if the Government and the Prime Minister are sincere about tackling injustice in this country and making sure that work pays, they must act. Once again, I commit to working with them on this. We must address the poverty and discrimination that universal credit is causing women, children, disabled people and black, Asian and minority ethnic communities now. This will only get worse as universal credit is rolled out.

This country is at a crossroads. Brexit must not blind this Government to other obligations to their citizens. We must all work together in the national interest to avert the disaster that is about to unfold if universal credit is rolled out without fixings its failings. I urge all MPs to vote with their conscience, stand with us and their constituents and pause and fix universal credit.

1.53 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): Today we have seen yet another excellent set of labour market statistics: unemployment is 1 million lower than in 2010 and youth unemployment has gone down by 415,000 over the same period. Underneath those raw statistics lie the work and effort of millions of families across the country who are keen to get on and make the best of their lives: people who are in work but want to earn more, people who are out of work but really want to get a job. Young and old all deserve the opportunity to maximise their potential. That is what universal credit is all about.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Gauke: Let me make a little progress.

When it comes to universal credit, there is much talk about supporting the principles behind the reform, and I welcome that. Before turning to the issues raised by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams)—and I will be taking plenty of interventions—I think it would be helpful to the House to articulate what those principles are.

The fundamental purpose of universal credit is to assist people into work. It is through work that people can support themselves, obtain greater economic security and progress in life. Universal credit does that by making work pay.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: Let me finish on the principles, and then I will take plenty of interventions.

We inherited a welfare system that puts in place barriers to people fulfilling their potential. If those on jobseeker’s allowance do more than 16 hours of work, they must go through the disruption of stopping their benefit claim only to start another. Many on employment and support allowance can be faced with a choice between financial support or work while we know that many thousands would like, and would benefit from, both. Once a person is in work, they are all too often caught by the hours rules in tax credits. Universal credit cuts through that by taking six different benefits and replacing them with a single system: a system where claimants receive tailored support to get them into work; a system where claimants have to deal with only one organisation, not three; and a system that ensures it always pays to work and always pays to progress.
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It is not the principle, but the practicality that is at issue. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] The principle of getting people back into work is something that we on the Labour Benches accept. The citizens advice bureau, the Trussell Trust and even John Major are saying that universal credit should be delayed, because it is increasing poverty and leading to debt and rent arrears. Are they wrong?

Mr Gauke: My argument is that we should not be pausing this. May I just say that I welcome the clear expression of support for the principle of universal credit? That is helpful. The case I will make today is that the principles lead us to a design that is focused on making work pay. It is diminishing the differences between being out of work and being in work, and can make a significant difference.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con) rose—

Lucy Frazer rose—

Mr Gauke: I give way to my right hon. Friend. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) has just been promoted. The Secretary of State needs to gesticulate whom he means with greater clarity.

Mrs Main: I thank the Secretary of State for that promotion. I look forward to receiving it in the post.

Is the Secretary of State any more aware than I am of the topic of this debate? Yesterday, the Opposition wanted to fix universal credit. Today, the word “fix” has been dropped. It seems that the Opposition want to pause but not fix. Has he any greater awareness of this matter?

Mr Gauke: That astuteness demonstrates why my hon. Friend should become my right hon. Friend sooner rather than later.

It is a very revealing point. There is no real attempt to fix this. This is about pausing it and wrecking it.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State seen the survey of 105 local councils, which showed that of claimants who claim universal credit, over half of the council tenants are in rent arrears compared with only 10% of those on the old housing benefit? Does that not show that this system needs to be paused and fixed?

Mr Gauke: Part of the issue is that that is not comparing like with like. The right hon. Gentleman will understand that the selection of people who will be on universal credit will be of a different group than the housing benefit population as a whole. [HON. MEMBERS: “Why?”] The reason is that in many cases, going on universal credit involves a change of circumstances, and that change of circumstances may in fact be a reason why people are in arrears. [Interruption.] May I just make this point? I know that the right hon. Gentleman has concerns about how we address the issue of the early period, so I will say a little bit more about it. We are seeing improvements in payment timeliness, and people are getting more support early so the reasons for increased rent arrears will not necessarily apply.

I want to make this point about what universal credit does. The work done within universal credit to give people the support to prepare for work can be too easily missed from debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I will just make a little bit of progress.

Universal credit gives a person a work coach, who provides personalised support, helping them to stay close to the labour market and overcome barriers to work. A universal support package provides people with assistance to build confidence and competence with IT, manage their universal credit account online and access online job search facilities and training. Universal credit makes being out of work more like being in work, because people are paid monthly, as 75% of employees are, and because it is paid directly to tenants instead of to their landlord. It also stays with recipients during the transition from being out of work to being in work.

Lucy Frazer: The Secretary of State makes a really important point about the unemployment figures and the importance of getting people into work. Will he join me in congratulating my constituency, which has one of the lowest levels of unemployment—the sixth lowest—in the country, with only 375 people unemployed or claiming unemployment benefit?

Mr Gauke: My hon. and learned Friend is right. We need to build on the progress that has been made in her constituency and, indeed, generally across the country, and further assist people into work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I will give way to one of my predecessors as Secretary of State.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is being very generous with his time. Did not the shadow Secretary of State rather give the game away when she denied any link at all between universal credit and the increase in employment levels? Since 2010, the Labour party has set its face against welfare reform. In 2010, Labour Members ran to the barricades to defend an outdated system that trapped people in poverty and worklessness for years.

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is yet a further example of the Opposition turning their back on reforms. I listened to the remarks of the shadow Secretary of State—

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Gauke: I am just making a point about the speech we just heard from the shadow Secretary of State, who has set her face against any form of conditionality in the benefits system, as far as I can tell. She fails to appreciate that the best way of helping claimants is to get them into work. That sometimes requires a change of behaviour, and a degree of conditionality within the system is required to ensure that people change their behaviour so they can make progress.
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): On this side of the Chamber, we live in the real world of our constituents. People suffering from motor neurone disease came to see us in Westminster yesterday to say that on top of the agony of their disease, they faced the indignity of fighting for their full entitlement under PIP. Today a landlord came to see me in my office, saying that he will never again let to tenants on universal credit, and a single mum told me that she is desperate because, with roll-out just before Christmas, she and thousands of others face a bleak Christmas. Does the Secretary of State begin to understand—

Mr Speaker: Order! I am sorry to have to shout, but the hon. Gentleman, though he speaks with great force and eloquence, took too long. We must have shorter interventions, as it is not fair on others.

Mr Gauke: Let me turn to the important point of claimant commitment.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Gauke: I will give way, but not for a moment. Throughout this period, claimants have a flexible, clear and tailored claimant commitment so they fully understand their responsibilities. The commitment supports and encourages them to do everything they can to move into or towards work, or to improve their earnings. The only thing we ask is that claimants meet reasonable and agreed requirements that take into account their individual circumstances and capability, including mental health conditions, disability and caring responsibilities. I hope that this approach to benefit conditionality will have the support of both sides of the House, including the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle).

Ms Angela Eagle: The Secretary of State must surely realise that the way in which the system is being administered is leaving people penniless and possibly destitute. He must address that point. The Government are rolling all the six benefits into one; if that is then not available to people for six weeks, there are people who cannot afford to survive in that time. The loans, which have to be paid back, are not an adequate response. Will the Secretary of State admit the human suffering that is happening in all our constituencies and deal with that particular point?

Mr Gauke: Let us be clear: if people need support under this system, they do not have to wait for six weeks. [HON. MEMBERS: “They do!”] They do not have to wait for cash in their pocket from the state because they can get an advance, which is normally paid within three days. If someone literally does not have a penny, they can get that money on the day. There is a responsibility on all of us as Members of Parliament to help our constituents when they get into problems, rather than trying to weaponise them politically. One way this could be done is to encourage our largest housing associations to have an implant inside the Jobcentre Plus so that at the very moment somebody goes on to universal credit, the housing association is then able to make sure they get the necessary advance so that they can pay their rent. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Co-operation between housing associations and the Department for Work and Pensions is an important part of improving the service. We are seeing improvements in how that operates and I hope it continues to improve further.

David Morris: My constituency was a pilot scheme for universal credit, and I regularly meet the jobcentre and the citizens advice bureau. The important point is that there were teething troubles in the early days, but people can now get a loan on the day. The worst wait is seven days, depending on the individual’s circumstances. The problem—if there is a problem that has to be addressed—is how the loan is paid back. The repayment cap is currently at 40% of payments. Would the Secretary of State look into a 10% rate instead, to help the system flourish even further?

Mr Gauke: The advance is typically paid back over six months, so it is essentially a deduction of around 8% from universal credit payments for the first six months. The figure of 40% takes into account all deductions that may conceivably apply in such circumstances.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I have given way numerous time already, probably a multiple of the number of times the shadow Secretary of State gave way. I do not want the House to miss this point: universal credit represents a generation-changing culture shift in how welfare is delivered and how people are helped, creating a system that allows people to break free from dependency, take control of their lives and move into work. Our analysis shows that 250,000 more people will be in employment as a result of universal credit when it is fully rolled out. Universal credit is picking up from a deeply flawed system and striving to solve problems that were previously thought unsolvable.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): If the Secretary of State’s intention really is not to cause hardship and distress, why will he not get rid of that automatic six-week wait? Many people still do not know about it. Many do not know to go to their MP to seek solutions. Get rid of it. What he is talking about is a loan, which has to be paid back over six months and which many people are not eligible for. The point is that the way the system is designed is making people fall into hardship, and it is deliberate. It is not an accident. It is absolutely an integral part of the design. Change it.

Mr Gauke: I will come back to the six-week period.

We have to remember that we have inherited an old system, in which complexity and bureaucracy often served to stifle the independence, limit the choices and constrain the outlook of its claimants. The disincentives in the legacy system to work or earn more have been removed, along with the complex hours rules and cliff edges.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I have to make some progress.

Claimants now no longer need to switch between benefits if they move in and out of work, so they are free to take up short-term and part-time work without worrying about being worse off or their claim ending. It is working: our research shows that compared with benefits if they move in and out of work, so they are free to take up short-term and part-time work without worrying about being worse off or their claim ending. It is working: our research shows that compared with the impact of universal credit on tenants. Eighteen months ago, I visited Radian, a housing association in my constituency. Radian expressed to me and to our hon. Friend the Minister for Employment concerns about the impact of universal credit on tenants. Eighteen months later, those people are in work, paying the rent and working with the housing association. The outcome is positive. Labour Members are simply scaremongering.

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the reality. This is not an abstract discussion; we are discussing real people’s lives.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): Thanks to a Conservative Government, we now have almost full employment in this country. For a number of people who claim unemployment benefits, their mental health is a barrier to getting work. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give us that the universal credit system will either help people with low-level mental health conditions to get back into work, or give them the support they need for their future?

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. I was about to give an illustration of the way universal credit can work involving a claimant with learning difficulties, who was out of work when he came to the jobcentre. His work coach provided tailored support, building his confidence and capability. That man is now in work. He told us that he is proud of himself for getting into work, and that he did not think it would have been possible without universal credit. He is now looking forward to the future. That personalised support, tailored to individual circumstances, is much more widely available.

Let me give another example. A university graduate had not previously had a job but was desperate to get into work. Her work coach helped to build her skills—interview skills and application writing—and she was soon successful in gaining a 16-hours a week job. When she was offered overtime, the work coach supported the claimant flexibly, rescheduling her Jobcentre Plus appointments so they did not clash with her new hours. The claimant could accept the overtime, confident that she would remain on universal credit and continue to be supported by her work coach.

Those are true testimonies of the powerful potential of the reform to change lives for the better.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the best ways to help people into work and support them is to deal not only with the six-week wait, but with the fact that—according to Citizens Advice—one in three people now wait longer than six weeks, and one in 10 wait longer than 10 weeks?

Mr Gauke: Let me deal with the points on the waiting period and timeliness. I acknowledge the concern. Returning to the intervention from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), we have to remember that a waiting period is fundamental to the structure of universal credit, which pays people monthly, mirroring the world of work. Universal credit also automatically adjusts payments to take account of a claimant’s income in a particular month, meaning that a claimant will always be better off in work. To do that, payments necessarily have to be made in arrears.

We know that some people cannot afford to wait six weeks for their first payment, which is why we have advances that provide those in financial need with up to their first universal credit payment. Increasing numbers of people claim that; the numbers from July show that the majority of claimants did so. Claimants who want an advance payment will not have to wait six weeks; as I said, they will receive the advance within five working days, and if someone is in immediate need the advance can be paid on the same day. I recently improved the guidance to DWP staff to ensure that anyone who requires an advance payment will be offered it up front.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I will make a little more progress before giving way again.

Of course it is important that we get people the right money at the right time. As UC full services roll out, there have been significant improvements in verifying claims and making payments on time. Our latest data show that 80% of new claimants are being paid in full and on time; 90% receive some payment before the end of their first assessment period; and, taking into account advances, 92% of new claimants receive some support within six weeks. More than 1 million claims to UC have been taken. The live service is available in every part of the country and the full service version is already in 135 of our jobcentres for new claims across all claimant types.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Secretary of State says that advances are typically paid within three days. Of course, an advance in crisis funding is an admission that the system is failing, but aside from that, what evidence does he have for saying that payments are made within three days? The answer to a written question that I received this week shows that the DWP is not collecting those data.

Mr Gauke: For a start, it is not crisis funding; it is an advance giving people flexibility in when they receive their universal credit payments. Our commitment is to deliver within five days, and my understanding is that typically payment is made within three days. We are providing support to people earlier. I acknowledge the concerns. I have seen the hard cases of people who have apparently gone weeks—sometimes months—without support. What we are saying is that they can get an advance quickly, as long as we have verified their identity.
Helen Whately: May I back up my right hon. Friend, drawing on work I have done in my area and on discussions with citizens advice bureaux? When people have needed advance payments, they have received them incredibly quickly, within two or three days, and the jobcentre staff tell me that universal credit is helping them to help people to get into work. Does he share my frustration at hearing so much negativity from Labour Members and never any positives?

Mr Gauke: I certainly do. This is an important matter and strong views are held in all parts of the House, but I urge right hon. and hon. Members to engage with their local jobcentres. When they talk to jobcentre staff, many Members hear what my hon. Friend just described—that the universal credit system is delivering for people, giving them the opportunity to get jobs. That is exactly what we are determined to do.

Universal credit is working and the roll-out will continue—to the planned timetable. We are not going to rush things. It is more important to get this right than to do it quickly. At the moment, of the total number of households that will move on to universal credit, we are currently 8% of the way there. By January, it will be 10%. Across the country, we will continue to improve our welfare system to support further those who aspire to work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I have given way numerous times. I am conscious that, as the shadow Secretary of State repeatedly said, 90 speakers want to get into this debate, and I have spoken for nearly half an hour, which is more, I am sure, than the House can endure.

We are under no illusion but that we must continue to work together to resolve issues as they arise and ensure a successful roll-out. I want to improve the system. I want constantly to refine the system. I want to make changes where necessary to test and learn and improve. I am determined to do that. I have made an announcement today along those lines about telephone lines.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): We all welcome the Government’s concession on the premium phone line, but I met the CAB on Monday and it tells me that advisers are sometimes waiting up to half an hour to get through. Would the Secretary of State consider an MP-type hotline for advisers from the CAB and other welfare advisers?

Mr Gauke: First, we have never had a premium line; it is the same sort of system that one of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents would find if he called him and booked into a constituency surgery. It has never been a premium line, but we are changing it. On the average waiting times, I think that in September it was five minutes and 40 seconds. As for his particular proposal, let me take that away. Very often the CAB needs to call the local jobcentre rather than the national centre, because if it wants to deal with an individual case, dealing with the jobcentre would be more helpful.

Simon Hoare: I thought that there was a helpline for MPs to deal with all our constituents’ cases—unless it is a courtesy extended only to North Dorset.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but to be fair to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), I think that he wants to extend the helpline that we have or offer a similar service to advisers. As I say, I will look at that, but very often advisers need to contact the local jobcentre.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I have spoken for a long time and I want to push on.

The approach that we are taking is to test, to learn and to improve, because we are delivering a really important and fundamental change, moving towards a more dynamic system that is already improving lives and has huge potential to do more.

Let me say something about the approach we have heard from Labour Members. We have adopted, I believe, a responsible approach. Of course, there are legitimate questions to ask, and no Government can object to scrutiny, but let us not pretend that that is what we are getting from Labour Members. What we are hearing today is not constructive opposition—not a plan to reform universal credit, but an attempt to wreck it. It is an attempt to paralyse a policy that will help 250,000 more people get into work and to block a reform that will increase opportunity. It is an attempt to play politics but with no attempt to set out a real alternative. I say to my colleagues, well, let them do that, but we will proceed.

We will address the historical failures of our benefits system, we will increase opportunity, and we will deliver a welfare system that puts work at the heart of it.

2.24 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Back in 2010 when universal credit was first mooted by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the SNP gave it a cautious welcome. My predecessor as the SNP’s social justice spokesperson, Dr Eilidh Whiteford, said at the time that “some of the measures set out today—particularly the universal credit—are very welcome.”

The initial premise of a simplified social security system streamlined with one payment was a good idea. The SNP still supports that idea.

However, successive Chancellors and Work and Pensions Secretaries have not just salami-sliced the idea; they have hacked it to bits as £12 billion of cuts need to be found from somewhere—anywhere—within the DWP. The fast-fading dream of a budget surplus meant arbitrary cuts to departments across Whitehall, but particularly the DWP, such that indiscriminate and unco-ordinated cuts were required. Cuts to tax credits, to the work allowances, to employment support allowance and to housing benefit—all component parts of universal credit—have undermined the new system. Indeed, having initially welcomed the premise behind universal credit, Eilidh Whiteford was one of the first to warn about the problems we see in its roll-out today. I wish she were standing here today for that reason.

Yesterday a group of very prominent Government Back Benchers met the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State and presented them with a set of areas which the Government could act on quickly as the roll-out was going on, and which would immediately help people and improve universal credit. Let me be clear: we do not want to see universal credit scrapped; we want it fixed and improved. The improvements suggested yesterday were cutting the automatic minimum wait from at least six weeks to a guaranteed four weeks, making payments...
on a fortnightly rather than a monthly basis, and doing more on advance payments to make them part of the award and therefore not recoupable as a loan. Those would be very welcome steps. None of those changes would break the bank. All of them would help. All of them would make a meaningful change to people’s lives. Those changes are the focus of what SNP Members and the Scottish Government have been calling for over the course of months and years, so of course we would have supported them.

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): The suggestion that I would like to add to that list—I wonder if the hon. Gentleman agrees with me—is that the Department might start to monitor whether people who have requested split payments, which were put in place by campaigners like me to ensure that victims of domestic violence can access any of their finances. At the moment, under the current system, they have to admit it in the jobcentre, often in front of their partner.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. That is one of the flexibilities that the Scottish Government are going to use, so yes, we absolutely support it. Indeed, I was about to go on to some of the areas where we would want the Government to go further.

We want the Government to address single household payments; to reduce the 63% taper rate, which far exceeds the top rate of tax; to scrap the two-child tax credit limit and the rape clause; to look again at cuts to housing benefit; to look again at employment support; and to look again at the work allowances. I understand why the concerned Tories chose the issues they did because they are easy and quick to do without costing much money—but it appears that their pleas have fallen on deaf ears, at least for now. I suspect that if the Government abstain this evening, again, it will be only a matter of time before changes have to be made—so why not do it now? If the Government are abstaining to play for time until the Budget, what happens with the areas about to experience roll-out over Christmas? The Government must commit to fix this now.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman share my concern at learning about my case of which we all have many. I am about to raise one myself.

Neil Gray: That is another appalling constituency case of which we all have many. I am about to raise one myself.

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): My constituents had universal credit rolled out last November, and we have been bearing the brunt of it since then. The only measurable difference we have seen is that food bank referrals have gone up by 70%. People cannot wait for the Government to make up their mind on how they are going to fix this system.

Neil Gray: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, as do the expert charities and organisations involved in alleviating food poverty. The Secretary of State will, of course, claim to have listened to concerns and made a concession by apparently reducing the time taken to process advance payments and crisis loans. Leaving aside the point that I have already made that for many, myself included, the very fact that these advance payments exist highlights that universal credit is failing. I struggle to see what has changed since his announcement. I know from my written parliamentary question this week that there is no data available on how long the claims took to process previously, but my suspicion is that it will not be too dissimilar to before the supposedly big concession in the Secretary of State’s Tory conference speech. I do not think that anything has really changed.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is important to understand and address all the unintended consequences of universal credit. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital for the Government to talk more to local authorities, which are often on the receiving end of people in crisis—those who have been made homeless or who are struggling to pay for food for their families? As an illustration, universal credit claimants make up 15.4% of all local authority tenants in my borough, but they account for 49% of all tenant arrears. That is not unusual.

Neil Gray: I agree, and I think it is good for agencies to talk to each other to ensure that the system works as smoothly as possible.

In spite of the concessions and potential changes, and in the full knowledge of the evidence of the harm that universal credit is doing to our constituents, the Government are determined to press on. As the House of Commons Library briefing points out, the problems include “financial hardship and distress caused by lengthy waits before the first payment of UC is received, compounded by the 7-day ‘waiting period’ for which no benefit is paid; some, particularly vulnerable claimants, struggling to adapt to single, monthly payments in arrears; inflexible rules governing Alternative Payment Arrangements such as direct payment of rent to landlords;” and “increases in rent arrears, with serious consequences not only for claimants but also for local authorities and housing providers, as a result of exposure to greater financial risk”.

That is why the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has circulated a briefing ahead of this debate in support of a pause and fix of universal credit. In addition, homelessness claimants have been unable to get help with the full cost of emergency temporary accommodation.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the impact on social landlords and housing associations is absolutely correct. We have not yet seen the full roll-out in Cardiff—it is not due until the new year—but I have been contacted already this week by social landlords who tell me that average rent arrears are as much as £500 for universal credit claimants, and that some have had to wait as long as three months to get their payments in place.

Neil Gray: That is one of the most baffling areas, and one of the easiest for the Government to reform. It is causing untold stress to social landlords and to our constituents, who are being made homeless as a result of a massive rise in evictions.
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op):
Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the breaking of the system has gone too far when organisations such as the Greater Manchester Law Centre refuse to support universal credit, on the basis that it results in further adversity and punishment for vulnerable people?

Neil Gray: Yes, absolutely. The Trussell Trust has reported a 17% rise in food bank aid in areas in which universal credit has been rolled out, which is double the year-on-year rise in the rest of the UK. There is, therefore, a direct correlation between the roll-out of universal credit in its current form and people living in food poverty. That cannot and should not be ignored. Citizens Advice in East Lothian, where UC has been rolled out, says that more than half its clients on UC are £45 per week worse off. The third of clients who are better off are up only 34p a week. Citizens Advice Scotland says that rent arrears are up 15% in UC areas, compared with a 2% drop everywhere else in Scotland. The DWP’s own figures show that one in four UC claimants wait longer than six weeks—some of them up to 10 weeks—to receive a payment.

The SNP has been warning about these issues for years. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) met the right hon. Member for Dumfrieshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), who was then the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, on 14 March 2013. My hon. Friend was, at the time, the leader of the Highland Council, which was one of the first areas for roll-out. Nothing has been done. The warnings from Highland have been ignored, despite the roll-out being designed to allow improvements to be made as it progressed.

Where universal credit is currently in operation, rent arrears have spiked, because housing benefit is no longer paid directly to the landlord and people are not getting their money on time. Food bank need has grown because of the minimum six-week wait for payment. In-work poverty is rising as new work benefits start to become sanctionable, and the incentive to work is removed by the cuts to work allowances.

Of course, the DWP has claimed, and will claim, that universal credit is motivating people into work, but that is not true on the scale that it would wish us to believe from its rhetoric. The DWP’s own figures show that for the 2% of jobcentres with UC, there has been a 3% uplift in employment rates. That accounts for all the factors that contribute to people finding or staying in work. Are the rises in food bank use, rent arrears and in-work poverty really worth a 3% uplift in employment, when many of those jobs are precarious, low-paid and unsustainable? The DWP must look again at cuts to work allowances to really make work pay, cut in-work poverty and allow people to get on. The roll-out is supposed to allow the DWP to adapt where things are going wrong, and to fix the problems. Why, then, are the Government not listening to their own Members, to the expert charities, to the Scottish and Welsh Governments and to constituents?

On the subject of listening to constituents, the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) is failing his constituents by failing to be here to take part in a potential vote on this issue, which will impact on thousands of his constituents and a huge proportion of children in his constituency. Normally, Whips give slips for votes or business days so that MPs can take part in important constituency events or travel with Committees. The Government Whips appear to have slipped the hon. Member for Moray so that he can run the line at a football match in Barcelona. Far from standing up for his constituents, who would get sanctioned for not turning up to a work-related meeting—

Lucy Frazer: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate, in a debate about universal credit, to talk about the absence or otherwise of a particular Member of Parliament?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I allowed a passing reference to the hon. Gentleman, because I understand from exchanges at Prime Minister’s questions that the hon. Gentleman in question had already been informed by colleagues of the hon. Gentleman who currently has the floor that his name might be mentioned in this context today. I have allowed a passing reference; that is all. I think we have had enough about the hon. Member for Moray.

Neil Gray: To be fair, Madam Deputy Speaker, we have all had enough of the hon. Member for Moray. It is worth a passing mention, because the Moray food bank is also concerned about the fact that the hon. Gentleman is not here today, for the very reason—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We will return to the subject of the debate.

Neil Gray: At the start of the year, Mr James Moran from Harthill in my constituency qualified as an HGV driver and managed to find work on a zero-hours contract as a driver while also receiving universal credit—exactly the sort of scenario under which universal credit was supposed to work better. Not long after gaining employment, however, Mr Moran was sanctioned, despite being in employment. As he started the process of appealing the sanction, he suffered a stroke, which meant that he was no longer able to work as a driver. As the sanction was still in place, he returned home from hospital with no means of receiving an income. Despite getting some help from his elderly parents, Mr Moran struggled with no money whatever for more than a month. He then suffered a second stroke. Mr Moran has advised me that the doctors who treated him in hospital at the time of his second stroke admission told him that the low blood pressure that caused the second stroke was almost certainly caused by malnourishment. That malnourishment was a direct result of a DWP sanctioning error, forcing Mr Moran to live without an income—to live on fresh air.

I wrote to the Secretary of State about the case on 1 September and have repeatedly chased his office for a reply, but I have received nothing in return to date. The six-week minimum wait appears to be built into the Secretary of State’s correspondence turnaround as well. I do not take that personally, because I gather from press reports that the Chair of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions has had similar problems with getting the Secretary of State to put pen to paper. Perhaps he will now chase a reply.

The revelation last week that our constituents on universal credit had to pay 55p a minute was a further dent to the public’s confidence in this Government’s handling of universal credit. It should not really have
been much of a revelation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has been raising the telephone tax issue for months—and what a win for my hon. Friend this morning, as, following his ten-minute rule Bill in February, the Government have finally announced that the phone line will be free. But why must we wait until the end of the year for all telephone charges to be scrapped? The Government should bring in that welcome concession now.

Alex Burghart: Did any SNP Members, when they raised this issue, ever point out that there was a call-back service?

Neil Gray: Yes, we did. The hon. Gentleman’s intervention completely misses the point. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Why are hon. Members shouting?

Neil Gray: It is little wonder that the Government have moved. We all watched in horror as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury was put up to defend charging people with no income—living on fresh air—55p a minute to get help and answers about why their payment had been delayed. She told viewers of the BBC’s “Daily Politics” to go to their local jobcentres instead of lifting the phone to the DWP—the same jobcentres her Government colleagues are shutting. After being pressed time and again by Andrew Neil, the Chief Secretary, who has quite a bit of influence over financial matters in this country, could neither defend nor explain why people on zero income were paying more to access help than people under investigation for tax fraud, although the irony appeared to be lost on her.

The idea that this concession has been made to appease the Opposition or just a few concerned Government Back Benchers is of course nonsense. This morning’s concession was made for no other reason than to try to deflect attention from the fact that this Government do not carry the support of their own side of the House, never mind of the House in its entirety. It is a red herring to divert press and media coverage away from the rebellion on the Government side of the House.

In conclusion, I return to the other areas on which the Government could act now at little cost, but which would benefit so many people. In doing so, I wish to appeal directly to Tory and Democratic Unionist party Members who have been working hard behind the scenes to try to get the Government to shift. Tory MPs have raised this issue with the Prime Minister, and DUP MPs have signed early-day motions consistent with the motion. The appeals have been made, the case has been made and the evidence is there for all to see: universal credit is not just about getting people into work; it is actually about changing lives so that those people with no income—who have quite a bit of influence over financial matters in this country, could neither defend nor explain why people on zero income were paying more to access help than people under investigation for tax fraud, although the irony appeared to be lost on her.

The time has passed for walking by on the other side. It is crucial that we vote tonight to say to the Government, “You cannot just ignore this any longer. You cannot plough on regardless. You must act, and act quickly.” After being pressed time and again by Andrew Neil, the Chief Secretary, who has quite a bit of influence over financial matters in this country, could neither defend nor explain why people on zero income were paying more to access help than people under investigation for tax fraud, although the irony appeared to be lost on her.

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Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Duncan Smith: I will give way in a minute.

That is why universal support—now bringing in councils—will identify such people and help them. That is the purpose of universal credit.

Michael Tomlinson: Was my right hon. Friend as surprised and disappointed as I was, during Prime Minister’s questions, to hear this policy described and characterised as “calculated cruelty”? There is nothing cruel about getting more people into work. There is nothing cruel about encouraging more people to work more than a mere 16 hours. There is nothing cruel about simplifying an overly complex system. The cruelty is trapping people in a lifetime of benefits.

Mr Duncan Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

Stephen Timms: The right hon. Gentleman has explained the theory of the four-week delay, but does he accept that that theory simply does not work for the very large number of people who are still paid weekly?

Mr Duncan Smith: It is not a theory, but I will come on to that in a minute. The right hon. Gentleman and I have had plenty of conversations and discussions about the structure of this, and I want to take him up on that point.

I want to make the point, which is not often referred to by Labour Members, that the whole nature of the roll-out was deliberately set so as not to repeat the grave mistakes made when they rolled out tax credits and other benefit changes.

Neil Coyle: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Duncan Smith: No, because I am conscious that others want to speak, but I will come back to the hon. Gentleman in a minute.

I recall that my surgery was full of people who, under the tax credit changes, found they had no money at all. When Labour rolled out tax credits in a big bang, over 750,000 people ended up with no money at all. Since then, the thresholds have had to be raised dramatically to get money to those people.

Kate Green: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Duncan Smith: I will give way in a minute.

The roll-out of universal credit has been deliberately designed—it is called “Test, learn and rectify”—so that, as it happens, we can identify where there are issues, rectify them and then carry on rolling it out. I want to give an example of why stopping the roll-out now will not work.

One area that we discovered early on is that landlords were simply unaware of who was on benefits. As a result of all that, arrears would be racked up, but they did not know they could get that stopped and have direct payments made. That will be changed in the next stage of the roll-out, because a portal between landlords and the service centre will allow them to establish that immediately. Unlike the local housing allowance, under which people ran up huge levels of debt, but reset slightly and carried on, universal credit allows them only a two-month period of debts before they go on to direct payments. That critical change will be one way of resolving the problem.

Neil Gray: It is worth reminding the House that the former Secretary of State resigned because of the cuts being made to universal credit. I am puzzled about why he does not think it is a good idea to implement the potential fixes being suggested during the roll-out.

Mr Duncan Smith: I will come to that. The hon. Gentleman should not worry—I will not resile from why I resigned.

Too much of the debate has been based on evidence that is months old, when rectification has taken place and changes have been made. Let me give an example that has not been mentioned. The mistakes in tax credits and housing benefit mean that more than 60% of those coming on to universal credit already carry debt and rent arrears. Universal credit is identifying those people and having to clear up the errors. That is an important point. Before universal credit, too many people were left to get on with their lives and get deeper and deeper in debt.

Anna Soubry: My right hon. Friend and I are about the same age. Does he share my concern that anyone who is younger than us and listening to the debate might labour—no pun intended—under the misapprehension that, before the election of a Conservative Government in 2010, the previous system was perfect, when it has been bedevilled by flaws for decades? That is why this simplified system, when all the bumps have been ironed out, is welcome.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has borne the years better than me. However, I will do anything for a kind look—[Laughter.] Particularly from my right hon. Friend.

It is interesting that, in the past 24 hours, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has made the following statement:

“Universal credit has the potential to dramatically improve the welfare system, which is fragmented, difficult to navigate and can trap people in poverty.”

It went on to say that the system will help people “transition into work and will respond better to people’s changing circumstances.”

I agree. It would have been nice if the Opposition had started their debate by being clear and positive about how and why universal credit can change lives.

The point about test, learn and rectify is that it does exactly that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made many points in his excellent speech about the changes that are already beginning to happen. For example, some of the rent arrears are beginning to come down and the portal will help enormously with that.

However, I ask my right hon. Friend about universal support, which is the critical other bit of universal credit that no one has mentioned. It allows us to pick up the pieces around universal credit and deal with them on a human basis. Universal credit flags up when somebody has a debt problem and when they are running into arrears. Universal support is vital to work directly with them, using councils, jobcentres and all the other agencies, and hub up around them to help them change their lives on the basis of knowledge about how to pay their bills, their banking facilities and their debts. I ask for reassurance.
in the winding-up speech that Ministers will put in the extra effort, focus—and money, when necessary—to ensure that universal support rolls out successfully alongside universal credit. That is critical.

Neil Coyle: The right hon. Gentleman seems to acknowledge that universal credit has not worked for everyone, so does he agree that it has been almost as bad for some of those affected as online reviews of his novel, “The Devil’s Tune”? Comments include: “frighteningly bad”, “rubbish”, “utter drivel” and “hilariously awful—an outstanding compendium of bottomgravy”.

Mr Duncan Smith: I thought that was a reference to the hon. Gentleman’s speaking ability in the House.

Universal credit is a huge driver for positive change that, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said, will not just get people into work quicker, but help us identify those in deep difficulty and change their lives. That is the critical element that I hope will unite the House on what universal credit is all about.

We should not stall universal credit because doing so would damage it. Changes need to be made, and the problems that have been discovered need to be rectified as we move forward. The way that the system is being run is therefore right.

I direct my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to some of my earlier comments. As I said, I hope that the Chancellor will look again the way in which financing for the work allowances has been reduced. I would like that to be changed. My right hon. Friend made a very good point when he said that we keep what needs changing constantly under review. The issue around waiting days is critical—I know that he will consider that and see if the evidence stacks up for whether changing that would make a major difference.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on some of my earlier comments. As I said, I hope that the Chancellor will look into the way in which financing for the work allowances has been reduced. I would like that to be changed. My right hon. Friend made a very good point when he said that we keep what needs changing constantly under review. The issue around waiting days is critical—I know that he will consider that and see if the evidence stacks up for whether changing that would make a major difference.

I want to give that warning now so that hon. Members can trim their orations accordingly. Everybody may sit down now. I will not impose a formal time limit on the Chairman of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, whom I trust to take a reasonable and correct amount of time.

2.58 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I simply want to ask the Secretary of State a question. He said in his contribution that the scheme was working well—indeed, working so well that he was accelerating the pace of the roll-out. I reported to him in the Select Committee meeting this morning that Birkenhead food bank, after talking to other food banks in areas that have experienced the roll-out, believes that it will need 15 more tonnes of food this Christmas. What message should I take home, please? Should I tell the good citizens of Birkenhead that the food bank is scaremongering, that we should pay it no attention, and that we should take the Secretary of State’s word that the system is rolling out well, or that they should contribute the extra 15 tonnes to the food bank to prevent people in Birkenhead from being hungry over Christmas as a result of the roll-out and the right hon. Gentleman’s inability to deliver a scheme that works?

2.59 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I will follow your strictures, Madam Deputy Speaker, and be relatively brief.

Let me take first the words on the Order Paper, which do not bear any relation to what the shadow Secretary of State said. She said she was asking the House to support a motion to pause and fix universal credit, but that is not what it says. It is what the title said yesterday, but between yesterday and today all the Opposition are now calling for is for us to pause universal credit and not bother doing any fixing at all.

Mrs Main: Perhaps my right hon. Friend needs to look at the Annunciator. We have moved on. We are now not pausing; we are just discussing. There is no mention of “pause”.

Mr Harper: I was grateful for my hon. Friend’s earlier intervention, which was taken up. It is a serious point. The former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the
Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), made the point that pausing the roll-out of universal credit does not help anybody, given the positive effects it is having on getting people into work and allowing them to progress in the workplace. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made the point that this is both an in-work and out-of-work benefit. That means that those who are out of work and are thinking about taking a job can have the confidence to do so, because it will not mean throwing up in the air all their existing arrangements for paying for their house and supporting their family. They will have the confidence to take on that work and to take extra hours, because they know they will be better off and that if it does not work out they will not have to go back to the drawing board.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): One of the principal concerns about universal credit is what is happening to people’s housing costs. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that two-thirds of all private landlords now report that the people on universal credit they are renting to are in arrears? Will he support the call of housing charities for changes to be made to the roll-out of universal credit to make sure that when people take that step into work they do not put themselves at increased risk of losing their home? As currently envisaged, that is exactly what the roll-out will do.

Mr Harper: Let me address part of that point now and I will also come on to it later in my remarks. We should not compare universal credit with some mystical world of perfection; we should compare it with the existing system. Under the existing system, housing benefit is not perfect. There are lots of issues with housing benefit and tax credits in the existing benefit system. I understand that the citizens advice bureau has about 600,000 ongoing cases under the existing benefit system, so we are not talking about comparing universal credit with perfection. The existing system is not very good, does not work very well, and does not support people very well. Universal credit is an improvement.

On housing and the direct payment of landlords, which I know is controversial, my own view is that it is better to assume that people can manage their rent themselves. In cases where they cannot, and it is shown that they cannot, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green made it clear—as the Secretary of State did, with the roll-out of the housing portal—that we can deal with that. I do not think it is reasonable to assume that everybody on universal credit is incapable of managing their own money. That is what is assumed with the insistence on paying landlords directly. The other advantage of paying the person directly is that landlords cannot then discriminate against people who get housing benefit. If universal credit is paid directly to you and you make the payment, the landlord does not know that you are a benefit recipient and therefore cannot discriminate against you by having signs in the window saying, “I won’t take people on DSS,” which I know some landlords do.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: I do not have very much time and I am conscious that Madam Deputy Speaker wants me to be brief, so let me move on to my final two points.

On the design of the system, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is exactly right. It is about setting up a system that is like work, so that those people who are not yet in work have a system that enables them to get into work and manage those challenges. There was talk by the shadow Secretary of State about assuming IT skills. Universal credit is digital by default—it is only by default; people can still apply on paper—and I think 99% of people make claims electronically. In the modern world, most jobs have to be applied for electronically and most jobs require a certain level of IT skill. If someone is not capable of applying online, they will find it very difficult to get into work. It is important that the work coach can identify that requirement, so the proper help and support can be put in place to enable that person to have the digital skills to be able to get into the workplace.

The final point I wanted to address, which I think is potentially life-changing, is the nature of job opportunities open to people. We all know that the existing benefit system has hour limits, so people are unable to take jobs with more hours. There is a 16-hour limit and a 24-hour limit. Employers end up designing jobs around the benefit system, not the requirements of their business or the requirements of the individuals. Universal credit means that an employer can design a job around the requirements of the business. It means that if somebody is successfully working 16 hours and wants to take on more hours to support their family, they do not have to think about the benefit system. They can think about their own arrangements and the needs of their family. They know that universal credit will adjust to mean that they are better off having taken that job and that they will be better off taking those extra hours.

Universal credit is a very powerful benefit and a real change. It will, as has been said, change the culture and the life-chances of many people. I therefore support the continuation of the roll-out of universal credit with a careful test, learn and rectify approach, particularly with a Secretary of State who has demonstrated that he listens. I am not persuaded to support the motion on the Order Paper. I find it very easy to resist that temptation.

3.6 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I am pleased to be called to speak in this very important debate.

I want to start with the quotes from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation mentioned by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). He was very selective, as the foundation was much more cautious about the roll-out of universal credit. Without reform and redesign, universal credit will hurt the very people it is supposed to help: working people, families and communities right across this country.

I am proud that, as a Labour Member of Parliament, I stood in this year’s general election on a manifesto pledge to reform universal credit and end the injustice of claimants having to wait six weeks for their payments. During those six weeks, life does not stop. Rents still need paying, food still needs to be put on the table and the heating bills still need to be paid. I am interested in making sure that working people up and down the
country can enjoy dignity, fairness and stability in their lives. Without reform, universal credit promises quite the opposite: it creates instability, uncertainty and injustice.

Working people cannot survive another blow to their finances. Seven years of this Conservative Government has left working people struggling to make ends meet, and universal credit risks pushing many over the edge. This headlong rush to roll out universal credit will have dreadful consequences for this country’s children and young people. They will suffer the most. That is what the Government must remember: standing behind their ministerial statements and spreadsheets are real people, real families and millions of vulnerable children.

As the House knows, the scale of child poverty in this country, which is one of the richest in the world, is appalling. One in four children grow up in poverty today: that is 28%, or nine children in every classroom of 30. In my own constituency, over 9,000 children live in poverty—a shocking 34% of all our children. The Child Poverty Action Group has stood against the rising tide of child poverty. Its analysis reveals how working families will suffer: all families with children will be worse off by an average of £960 a year by 2020, and all single-parent families will be left worse off by, on average, £2,380. The Government should be ashamed of these figures. They have created a system that punishes the very people our welfare system was designed to protect. If the Minister is not yet convinced that a change is necessary, I ask that he reflect on the words of a former Prime Minister who described universal credit as “operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving”.

As he will know, those are the words of former Prime Minister John Major. I ask that the Minister listen and pause the roll-out for the sake of working families and children of this great nation.

3.10 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): In highlighting the fact that these are real people, the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) insinuates that Government Members have no understanding, which is absolute nonsense. I went to a school at the bottom of the league table, my father died at an early age, we had bailiffs at the door, and there was no support. We absolutely understand the importance of providing opportunity. That is what drove me into politics and why I support universal credit. I do not want it paused because it offers people a transformational opportunity.

I am not just plucking stats out of the air. I have hosted roundtables, I have visited jobcentres, I have talked to vulnerable people having to navigate incredibly complex, unique and individual challenges, and for the first time, with predominantly cross-party support, we have now introduced a system designed to treat people as individuals and give them tailored support.

Neil Gray: I thank the former Minister for giving way. He emphasised that he did not want the roll-out paused, and I understand his perspective, and that of other Conservative Members, on that point, but he did not mention any potential fixes. Does he appreciate the concerns raised and the fact that in some areas universal credit could be improved?

Justin Tomlinson: I have only just started! And I do not have long.

For me, the key is the simplification of benefits. One had to be a nuclear physicist to navigate the old system. We all saw in our casework some of the most vulnerable people missing out on benefits to which they were entitled. That was the driving priority for introducing universal credit, which removes the cliff edge for those wanting to enter or progress at work and those desperate to build up their hours, particularly those with disabilities and fluctuating health conditions, but unable to break through the 16-hour barrier. That has now been removed.

One of the most important benefits of universal credit is that for the first time people have a named work coach—an individual who will provide them with their own unique and tailored support, whether that be extra training, childcare, housing or, for the first time, in-work support. When I talk to staff in jobcentres, I see how incredibly enthused they are. We have empowered them to identify and bring together the help and support people need. That has been combined with a refresh of our jobcentres. For the first time, there is an attitude of wanting to help, a “can do” attitude—an attitude not of trying to find reasons why people cannot do things, but of doing everything we can to give them that opportunity.

I was asked in the intervention what the fixes were. The obvious one—the one we all wanted to see—was changes to the telephone number, so the announcement today was welcome. I also want to see greater engagement with employers, however, to bring them into jobcentres. My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) mentioned that we were close to full employment, and many of those still looking for work, being very far from the jobs market, need additional help. When I was Minister for disabled people, I talked to many people who were desperate for an opportunity and had skills, but the employers were not coming forward to hook up with that. We, as a society, through our refreshed jobcentre network, need to reach out to employers and say to them, “Where are your skills gaps? How can we help you change and adapt to take advantage of the huge wealth of talent?” With the right support, those people can contribute and make a positive difference both to employers and themselves. That has to be a priority.

We must also recognise the need for local solutions around the training options provided. We all represent diverse constituencies and have different employers. If a town is predominantly retail or manufacturing, that should be reflected in the 12-week programmes. Jobcentres must work with employers to set the type of training available in a way that maximises opportunities.

We have to grasp this opportunity to support people in work. This has never happened before. Most of us were pushed by our families to succeed. If we did well on our first entry into work, we were told to push for a promotion. For many of those entering work, however, particularly those on the national living wage who do not necessarily have that extra support, we should be providing mentoring and support. If they are turning up for work regularly, they should be talking to their employer and asking for a promotion, to be made a supervisor, or whatever it might be. We all want full employment and career progression. This is a huge opportunity and we all have a duty to get behind it. Yes, we are right to challenge the detail, but universal credit is transforming people’s lives and I fully support it.
3.15 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The roll-out of universal credit affects more than 5,000 of my constituents, as Southwark has been one of the trial authorities for “full service area” and has suffered all the consequences as a result. It is fair to say that it has been a disaster for some of those involved: the individuals left waiting 12 weeks-plus in many cases; the 1,242 Southwark Council tenants facing eviction-level arrears owing to universal credit delays. Only 11% of council tenants are on universal credit, but it accounts for 40% of all arrears—over £5 million. To cite the comparator that the Secretary of State seemed to struggle with: the average account balance for people on housing benefit is £8 in credit; the average universal credit claimant is now £1,178 in arrears.

It is equally damaging for some other landlords. Leathermarket JMB is absolutely brilliant and has done a huge amount of work to support people through the process, despite being denied information and access to the landlord portal at the beginning. Its average tenant not on universal credit is £73 in credit, whereas those on universal credit have arrears of £648 on average. Jobcentre Plus staff know that the system cannot cope and that the IT system is too fragile and inflexible and does not reflect things such as childcare costs or fluctuating incomes.

As for the voluntary sector, according to the food banks and Citizens Advice Southwark, the number of people coming through their doors has gone through the roof. Among the last tranche of people to whom universal credit was extended—[Interruption.] The Minister is disagreeing. We have had this discussion elsewhere. I will send him a letter about it rather than get into it now. We have just had a spat about the landlord portal at the beginning. Its average tenant not on universal credit is £73 in credit, whereas those on universal credit have arrears of £648 on average. Jobcentre Plus staff know that the system cannot cope and that the IT system is too fragile and inflexible and does not reflect things such as childcare costs or fluctuating incomes.

Ms Buck: We have heard from Government Members about the advantages of bringing all the benefits together into a single system, and there are indeed benefits of simplification, but is not the downside exactly as my hon. Friend says—that when something goes wrong in one part of the system, it brings about a potential catastrophe right across the system, including the potential loss of people’s homes?

Neil Coyle: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The Government stressed again today that they put a lot of faith in advance payments, but those cannot cover full rent costs. We found out this morning that the new guidance for Jobcentre Plus was only sent out this week, demonstrating perhaps that the Government were more afraid of their Back Benchers in today’s debate than they were concerned to address the underlying problems. We have just had a spat about the landlord portal. It is still not fixed. The Government claim it is, and there is some faster information sharing, but there is no evidence of an impact on cutting delays, inaccurate payments or overall arrears levels. The Government acknowledge that 20% of social landlords will never be included in the landlord portal—and that is before we look at the private rented sector.

There are other solutions that have been put to the Government not just recently but for months and years. We need to end the insistence that only the claimant can confirm rents. There is no point having “trusted partner” status for landlords and then ignoring them when they say that rent is owed. We need to remove the seven-day wait period for housing costs and introduce a transitional period of rent payment for those coming from housing benefit—rents do not change just because DWP decides to force someone on to a different programme. We should also backdate housing costs. All these issues have been on the table, but the Government have ignored them.

The Government also need to improve real-time information collection. We know that DWP and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs have now set up a “late, missing and incorrect” joint initiative, thanks to information shared by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), but the Department acknowledges that that does not address the system defects. The Government are treating the symptoms not the cause of the problems. Today is an opportunity to pause and address those underlying problems, not to push out universal credit even further, thereby increasing debt, poverty, arrears, evictions, food bank use and homelessness.

3.19 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): In my constituency the full roll-out of universal credit began in Lowestoft in May 2016, and is due to begin in Beccles later this month. In Lowestoft significant problems have been encountered: many vulnerable people have been placed in very difficult situations, and at times the system has struggled to cope. Over the past nine months the position has improved, but challenges remain, and it is important for lessons to continue to be learnt as the roll-out accelerates in the coming months.

On 21 February, the Minister for Employment, who is present, visited Lowestoft. He sat down with local DWP and jobcentre staff, the council leader and council officers, and listened to their concerns. Since then there have been steady improvements. The various agencies involved in the delivery of universal credit are generally working well together. Good initiatives have been introduced: there is a vulnerable people officer front of house, the citizens advice bureau works from the jobcentre, and the district council is holding regular workshops with private sector landlords. There is evidence that universal credit is allowing the jobcentre to support those in low-paid work, which it could not previously do. It is therefore able to improve their life prospects, and get them into work. I also think it appropriate to highlight the Secretary of State’s decision to refresh the guidance for DWP staff to ensure that anyone who needs advance payments is offered them upfront, and to make the helpline free of charge.

While it is right to acknowledge the improvements that have been made in recent months, it is important to recognise that much work still needs to be done. First, the long delays before some claimants receive a payment must stop. The Government must seriously consider implementing the recommendation from Citizens Advice that those who need it must receive a payment within two weeks, which they will not have to pay back.

Secondly, the role of private sector landlords in providing housing for claimants must be recognised, and they must be put on a level playing field with social landlords.
when it comes to setting up alternative payment arrangements. The “give tenants a choice” initiative, launched by the Residential Landlords Association and Shelter, should be looked at closely. If something is not done, the housing crisis will be made even worse as private landlords refuse to accept universal credit claimants as tenants. That will put more pressure on social housing, and will almost certainly lead to an increase in homelessness.

Finally, it is important to have in mind the vital role played by local housing authorities working in partnership with the DWP in the implementation of universal credit. They are having to bear the costs of providing emergency temporary accommodation and recovering housing benefit debt. Either those costs should be transferred to the DWP, or the councils should be given additional funds.

I understand why the Government wish to proceed with the roll-out of universal credit, and I give them my support. However, they must proceed with caution. They must not stick rigidly to a preconceived timetable; they must slow down or speed up as circumstances dictate. They should be pragmatic and not dogmatic, and they should continue to listen and respond to feedback.

3.23 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am keenly aware that the full service roll-out is due to start in the Newport part of my constituency on 15 November. As has been made clear by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and also by a host of organisations including Citizens Advice, Community Housing Cymru—which represents housing associations in Wales—the Trussell Trust, the Child Poverty Action Group, and the staff of those organisations on the front line, universal credit is not working for far too many people.

Although we support the principle of simplifying benefits, the evidence so far suggests that the design problems in the system, compounded by operational problems, delays and errors, mean that too many people are experiencing real financial hardship. In Newport—and in Caldicot, which will have full service in March—the DWP is dealing with only the simplest of claims from single people without children and without complex needs.

The ramped-up roll-out will widen to include more claims, as yet untested in the system locally. We have already seen cases of people waiting up to eight weeks for payments, not being able to meet financial commitments, borrowing and incurring interest charges, and struggling to catch up while remaining in debt. In my constituency, a family with three young children moved on to universal credit because of a new relationship, but then had to be moved back on to legacy benefits and tax credit because the system was not yet geared up for such cases. That family were left for eight weeks without a single payment, and had to rely on food banks for help.

The Government may decide to stick their head in the sand and ignore these valid criticisms, but let me explain what that might mean in my constituency. As I said earlier, the roll-out in Newport is due to start on 15 November. Given the six-week waiting period, my constituents will be lucky to receive their payment on the day after Boxing Day if it is on time, and not until the new year if it is not. No payments before Christmas will mean real hardship, and any payment received will be used to survive and to pay for food and heating, which by then—after six weeks with no income—will be a greater priority than paying rent. In neighbouring Torfaen, with the full service roll-out, 27% of Bron Afon tenants who moved on to universal credit in July had to wait an average of nine and half weeks for payment, which led to debt and borrowing from high-interest lenders.

I know that the Government will talk about advances, but they are not an adequate response. They cover only part of the universal credit claim, and must be repaid through deductions. The point is that people are being put into debt immediately. If half the number of new claimants have to rely on advance payments, the system is clearly wrong, and, as was pointed out earlier by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), that constitutes an admission that the system is failing.

Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem is compounded by the level of deductions of third-party debt that are allowed under universal credit—for example, council tax or utility bill debt? It is higher than the level allowed under legacy systems, which means that people are left with much less money.

Jessica Morden: I absolutely agree. The point is well made.

I know that housing associations are doing all they can to help tenants, and that there are huge demands on their advice services, not least when they are helping those who cannot go online. However, as Gingerbread has pointed out, two thirds of single parents are renting privately. What is happening to those with private landlords? Are they able to negotiate longer repayment plans?

I, too, support calls from organisations such as Community Housing Cymru which want a pause in the accelerated roll-out of the full service until the problems caused by delays have been addressed, improvements have been made in relation to, for instance, the six-week waiting period and the seven days without pay, and—this was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle)—the issue of landlord portals has been sorted out.

Let me finally say a word about our local DWP staff, who are dedicated and extremely hard-working, although I cannot say that I have spoken to many who feel enthused. They are on the front line of the delivery of the roll-out. Their numbers have been cut, and all kinds of changes are taking place in their service. They need to be properly resourced and supported, and the Government must make that a priority.

The movement on the call charges is welcome but overdue. We now need the Government to move further. We need them to understand the very real impact on people, not least in the run-up to Christmas. They must consider the practicalities, and pause the roll-out.

3.28 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): It is right that we are debating this important issue and, given its importance to all of our constituents, it is right that we do so respectfully, recognising even where we disagree, the evident strength and sincerity of the views of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams)—with whom I do not always agree in this Chamber, but with
whom I frequently agree as my fellow co-chair of the all-party group on dementia—made an important point in her speech, highlighting the need to fix our social security system to ensure it functions effectively. Our challenge is not that our historical social security system is badly designed, but that in many ways it was never designed as a whole at all. It has evolved from myriad changes over the decades, and for too long Governments of all shades shied away from this challenge. Universal credit represents a real step forward in addressing this, and in seeking to design a system fit for the 21st century, and it is the right thing to do.

Universal credit represents a progressive change to simplify the system, to tailor it to individuals, and to help to ensure work pays, removing that dreadful 16-hour cliff edge that previously existed.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Hornsea) (Con): In the context of the cliff edge, does my hon. Friend agree that under the old system some claimants lost £9 from every extra £10 that they claimed, and that that is what we are trying to correct?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes a point succinctly and effectively, highlighting, too, the great deficiencies of the previous system. The simple truth is that universal credit is helping to get more people into work, which we can all welcome.

On the call for a pause, the shadow Secretary of State did not set out in detail what she wants to see changed over the decades, and for too long Governments of all shades shied away from this challenge. Universal credit represents a real step forward in addressing this, and in seeking to design a system fit for the 21st century, and it is the right thing to do.

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Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes a point succinctly and effectively, highlighting, too, the great deficiencies of the previous system. The simple truth is that universal credit is helping to get more people into work, which we can all welcome.

On the call for a pause, the shadow Secretary of State did not set out in detail what she wants to see changed through such a pause. What I did, however, hear this morning in the Select Committee was a Secretary of State who is listening, and who cogently set out how the staged roll-out is specifically designed to allow for lessons to be learned and subsequent roll-out to be refined and adapted where improvements can be made, but without the damage that will be done by pausing the roll-out.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On the roll-out being staged, does my hon. Friend agree that a situation in which currently 8% of claimants are on UC, and the proportion will rise to only 10% by January, hardly amounts to a precipitate roll-out?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which highlights the point that both the Secretary of State and I have made, which is that this is being done in a very measured way.

I join other colleagues in welcoming the Secretary of State’s announcement in respect of the telephone advice line and the increased highlighting of the advance payments that are available. It is right that this help is in place, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will continue to take a close interest in how well this is working, making changes where necessary, and ensuring that all those claiming are treated with respect and supported. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) set out, universal credit is about treating people with respect and supporting them.

In seeking to ensure that we learn from the roll-out of universal credit and make changes where we can, as the roll-out is designed to allow, we must never lose sight of, or put at risk, the significant improvement of universal credit on previous systems and the significant benefits it delivers in helping people into work and changing their lives.

3.32 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The Government’s aim was to simplify and streamline the benefits system, to improve work incentives, to tackle poverty among low-income families, and to reduce the scope for error. The Government were, however, warned by IT companies that it was not possible to build a universal credit system, bringing the six systems together, in time for implementation, but they ignored that and continued; they developed in haste. The Government also ignored the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), when he called on the Prime Minister to reverse cuts in universal credit; it is still necessary to reverse all the cuts made to the initial system.

Former Prime Minister John Major described universal credit as “operationally messy, socially unfair” and socially unforgivable, but the Government did not listen to him. Experience tells us that the online system is far too complex, and was it ever really necessary for the helpline to cost 55p a minute? The announcement today is about appeasing Back Benchers; however, it will help new claimants.

The aim was to improve work incentives, and tackle poverty and low pay, yet the experience is of cuts to taper allowances, with 63% of every pound taken off people. Some families are £2,100 worse off than under the previous system.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I cannot see how this can be an incentive for people to go into work when most of the jobs they get are on zero-hours contracts. On the other hand, people are driven to food banks, which were brought in by the Churches to deal with the refugee problem, not to deal with the problems of this country.

Ms Rimmer: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. These people are stressed, suffering from the effects of poverty and the indignity of debt and borrowing from family and friends. Many are on medication for mental health issues, and much of this is debt related.

My constituency of St Helens South and Whiston suffers from income poverty. Many of the jobs created in the last 10 years pay much lower wages. Some people are holding two or three jobs down and many are on zero-hours contracts. My constituency also has one of the highest prescription rates of antidepressants in the country, and many of those on that medication are young people and parents.

The assessment period for universal credit is based on four weeks working. My families do not have savings to live on for four weeks when they have been out of work, and their extended family does not, so they go into debt.

The Government have insisted on the poor paying the price of banker-induced debt, and they have used the global financial crisis to cut public services and stop the improvements that Labour introduced—policies that were responsible for lifting 1 million children out of
poverty. Since 2010, the number of children in poverty has been rising. The Child Poverty Action Group has published figures showing that a further 1 million children may be driven into poverty, including 300,000 under the age of five—children hungry, children cold, children not able to go to school because they have not got a change of clothes. The Government are responsible for breaking up many families and children are suffering from stress. No wonder we have increasing numbers of children suffering from mental ill health.

The food bank in my full-service area has a 17% increase in usage—more than double the national average. More than half the users are people in work, and many of them are national health service workers.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Rimmer: Not at the moment.

A Citizens Advice survey showed that more than 39% of respondents waited more than six weeks for payment, while 11% waited more than 10 weeks and some waited 11 weeks. Where do they get the money from to live and to buy food? Of those on universal credit, 79% are in debt, which puts them at serious risk of eviction. Private landlords are not as understanding as social and charitable landlords. Bailiffs bang on the door, gas and electricity get cut off, and people are even at risk of imprisonment. Of those in rent arrears, 42% went into debt after making their claim for universal credit. Due to long waiting times, many have had notice to quit and been evicted from their family home.

The Government need to stop and open their eyes and ears. They should help, not punish, the poor and disabled. Be fair. Pause and repair this system.

3.37 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I believe our welfare system should do three simple things. It must be compassionate to those who need our help, it must be effective in getting them the help they need, and it needs to be fair to those who pay for it. Simply put, universal credit is a rare example of a policy that delivers on all three counts.

To start with compassion, rather than recipients having to make calls to up to three different agencies when something in their life changes, universal credit simplifies the system and ensures that nobody misses out on a benefit that they are entitled to because of a bureaucracy that is simply too complicated to navigate.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that people trying to claim universal credit have reported being on the phone for an hour trying to get their case dealt with? At £5 a minute, that cost is astronomical.

Rishi Sunak: I am sure that the hon. Lady was here and heard the Secretary of State make the point that the calls that have been made were all to local rate numbers. It is not right to say that they were premium rate numbers. As of today, those calls have been made free for all claimants, although they were offered the opportunity to be called back for free if the call charge was difficult. I am aware that the average wait time is two minutes, and of course a wait time of an hour is unacceptable. I am sure Ministers have heard that and will be doing everything they can to ensure that everyone across the country benefits from a prompt and cheap response.

At the same time as simplifying the system, universal credit humanises our bureaucracy by recognising that those who need our help do not have exactly the same needs. Instead of a faceless homogeneity, for the first time personalised work coaches can compassionately take into account the specific needs of each individual and their specific circumstances, tailoring the approach to them and ensuring that they get the specific help that they need.

Neil Coyle: How simplified, fair and supportive does the hon. Gentleman think it is for the 116,000 working disabled parents who are set to lose £40 a week from the disability income guarantee?

Rishi Sunak: I cannot say that I recognise that figure, because £700 million more was made available in the last set of universal credit reforms, all of which was directed at the most vulnerable in our society.

Neil Coyle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way again?

Rishi Sunak: No, I will carry on, given the number of people who want to speak.

Compassion alone is not enough. The effectiveness of our welfare system should be properly judged by the number of lives that it transforms, and that transformation comes from well-paid work. Universal credit ends the well-documented problem of single parents effectively working for free if they want to work for more than 16 hours. Universal credit ensures that all work truly pays, and it is working. Compared with the system that it replaces, claimants spend twice as much time actively looking for work and, for every 100 claimants who found employment under the old system, 113 will find employment under universal credit. In reality, the lives of more than 250,000 people will be transformed over the course of the roll-out through having a decent job and the opportunity to build a stake in our society.

Finally, universal credit is fair to the people who pay for it. In Britain today, we spend around twice as much on working-age welfare as we do on education. To put it another way, for every £1 that the taxpayer sends to the NHS, they also send £1 to the working-age welfare bill. Given the sums involved, I make no apology for speaking up for those who ask me, “Is this money well spent?”

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks of the transformational impact of universal credit, so will he please comment on the transformation for my constituents? In Croydon, two thirds of families in local authority housing are now in rent arrears and face eviction, compared with less than a third before universal credit was introduced.

Rishi Sunak: I obviously cannot comment specifically on what is going on in Croydon, but the reasons for rent arrears are complicated. The evidence shows that the level of rent arrears after three months of universal credit is exactly the same, if not lower, than under the old system.

Returning to the sums involved, universal credit ensures a responsible and sustainable system by putting in place a sensible regime of conditionality. That gives hard-working
taxpayers the confidence that when they contribute to the system, not only will that help somebody to get back on their feet, but that the person will also have a responsibility to do their bit. That is fair.

Universal credit is not perfect—no system so large and complex can be—and we should make improvements where we can, but it is significantly better than what it replaces, and the fundamentals of what it is trying to achieve are sound. It has been implemented slowly and methodically. It is insane to argue that it has been rushed when the full roll-out will have taken almost a decade from start to finish. This is welfare reform in action: making things simpler, ensuring work pays, and transforming lives. I urge the Government to carry on with their plan.

3.44 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP):
I am going to make a straightforward speech as I am aware of how many Members want to speak. I am conscious that many of our debates involve jargon that is inaccessible to most people who try to follow politics, so I rise to make just three basic points. First, I will explain what universal credit actually is. Secondly, I will describe what has gone wrong since the universal credit roll-out began. Thirdly, I will explain why it is so important that the Government halt—not scrap—the roll-out until we can deal with the problems effectively.

I find myself in a bizarre situation: I am going to stick up for the principles behind a Tory policy. Universal credit is a simplified online-only way of receiving benefits. It rolls together six benefits, including unemployment benefit, tax credits and housing benefit, into one personally tailored payment. It makes sense. For a lot of people, social security used to stop altogether once they began to earn above a certain amount. Universal credit seeks to remedy that by slowly and steadily declining as people earn more through their job, rather than suddenly stopping altogether.

That all seems absolutely reasonable, which is why I stress again that we are not calling for universal credit to be scrapped altogether. We want it to be halted because, like most Conservative policies, the minute we scratch beneath the surface we see the harsh truth. What has gone wrong here? There is a minimum 42-day wait for the first payment, which we have heard umpteen folk talk about, but I do not think the Chancellor appreciates the reality of what that means. It means the most vulnerable are being left for six weeks with absolutely nothing.

Angela Crawley: My South Lanarkshire constituency was one of the first in Scotland to see the roll-out of universal credit, and I have witnessed my constituents relying on food banks as they wait up to 12 weeks for their universal credit payment. Does my hon. Friend agree that the policy is clearly not working in practice? Will she invite the Minister to visit my constituency and see how his policy is actually working, because it is a disaster?

Mhairi Black: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point because I want to say to Conservative Members that none of us is lying about our experiences. We are not making things up. We are coming to the House with genuine problems that the Government are failing to address.

DWP figures show that around one in four new claimants waits longer than six weeks to be paid—a 25% failure rate: staggeringly alarming given that universal credit is still in its early days. Benefit delays remain a primary reason for the increase in the use of food banks. Citizens Advice has found that, from 52,000 cases, those on universal credit appear to have, on average, less than £4 a month left to pay all their creditors after they have paid essential living costs.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mhairi Black: I will keep going.

To progress with the roll-out of universal credit as it stands is callous at worst and arrogantly idiotic at best. We have heard multiple times that people can now apply for an advance payment, but the fact is that those advance payments are nothing more than a loan that has to be paid back at a later date. Simply changing the terms of that loan does nothing about the litany of systemic failures throughout the entire process. All it is doing is creating more of a burden on claimants and forcing people to deal with a problem that is not their fault in the first place.

The Government are almost starting to behave like some kind of pious loan shark, except instead of coming through people’s front door, they are coming after their mental health, their physical wellbeing, their stability and their sense of security. That is the experience of all our constituents.

This debate got me thinking about how all this has coincided with seven years of cuts and failures. The Government have failed to rebalance our economy, and they have failed to reach their own fiscal targets. We are not dealing with the national debt; we are simply shifting it on to vulnerable households. We have the worst decade of wage growth in 210 years. To put it in context, that is the length of time since the Napoleonic wars—that is how bad it is just now.

Scratch beneath the surface and we see that things are not as they appear. All we get is clichés about being strong and stable—scratch beneath it, and it is nothing like the truth. We are told that all these cuts are fine because we are introducing a national living wage—scratch beneath the surface, and it is a total lie because the national living wage is 95p below the real living wage.

I have sat in the Chamber and heard over and over again from Tory MPs that the social security reforms have been put in place to incentivise work. That is fair enough, but the Government cannot even incentivise their own Scottish Tory MPs to turn up and miss a football game in Barcelona—don’t dare talk about incentivising. I have heard the Government use that argument time and time again to justify their choosing to keep slashing money for the poor. The argument is used to justify the two-child policy and their sickening rape clause. [Interruption.] Conservative Members should listen for a wee second. I have heard it used to justify the sanctions regime while I have stood in this very Chamber and implored the Government to make it more humane—[Interruption.]
3.50 pm

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): I am grateful to have a chance to speak in a debate that has had well-informed contributions from Members on both sides of the House. Rather than going over all the arguments we have heard so far, I want to talk about a couple of personal examples I encountered in my previous career in retail, which show why this reform is so important in creating a system where it does pay to work. Retail is an industry where there are inflexible working hours and unpredictable amounts of overtime are often available; it is often dependent on the demand for the products in the store and so on.

Let me give a couple of examples that I saw during my time as a store manager in Lidl in my constituency: almost 10 years. As happens in many discount retailers, we often worked with a skeleton crew in the store—often as few as 12 members of staff. In such a situation, if one or two staff are limited to working 16 hours, it has a big knock-on impact. It does not just affect the individual who struggles to work the overtime, even though they want to; it has knock-on impacts for the business and means salaried employees, who might not be paid any overtime, still have to work late into the night because of the reduced flexibility that the current system offers. That is clearly not what it was designed to do, but it is one unintended detrimental consequence for the business and other employees.

I wish to make one other point about the unintended consequence of the current system for people who want to work more than 16 hours but are prevented from doing so. What they often do in these situations is end up hiding the hours that they work, through moving around holiday pay in the payroll system and even, as happens much more regularly than we might think, through store managers agreeing to pay other employees in the store; the money is received into their bank account and then pay their friend, who can actually work the overtime but refrains from doing so because of the 16-hour limit. Another point to make on that is that the people who end up willing to be part of those trades are younger and often get paid by the retail business at a lower wage because of that. They therefore end up passing across the lower wage to the person who would work or lose out on money themselves because they transfer across to somebody else from the post-tax income.

One other point about the UC system is that because it offers support to people through the work coach system, it helps a lot of people in industries such as retail who are under-confident about the progress they can make in that role. When I started as a shelf stacker in Lidl at 18, I was lucky enough to have parents who pushed me to keep progressing through the ranks. A lot of people who are under-confident and do not have that support do not get that sort of help and encouragement to step up through the business. Often we get people who are reliable employees—

Neil Coyle: I am struggling to follow the point, because one of the biggest challenges of UC is that those with fluctuating incomes struggle to get a consistent payment in order to pay their arrears. Although the hon. Gentleman may have been successful in retail, he is going to struggle to sell this particular turkey to employees in my constituency.

Luke Hall: As I say, my experience for many years has been of a hugely detrimental experience for people who try to work over the 16 hours if they are pushed to do so. So I do not accept the point, because I think the work coaches genuinely help people with their confidence in order to move forward. I have seen real-life experiences of that in Tesco and Aldi in my constituency, where I have spoken to employees who receive that sort of support.

In the short time I have left, I should say that I am encouraged by the Secretary of State’s announcement of the cancellation of the helpline fees. That is surely a simple and right change to make so that people on low incomes who are struggling to find work do not have to pay those charges. I am pleased by the Secretary of State’s assurance that we will not move faster than we should, in order to be sure that the system can take into account any difficulties in moving forward. I look forward to supporting a system that is helping people to move into work faster and to stay in work for longer. Universal credit is helping more people to move into work.

3.55 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate on a matter of some concern to me, because today universal credit is being rolled out in the Easington constituency; mine is one of 45 areas throughout the country in which universal credit is being rolled out this month. Like the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), I just cannot stand by and listen to some of the comments from Government Members, who speak as if this is an incidental, unimportant and dispassionate matter.

Some Conservative Members imply that there is no hardship or deprivation; they should walk a week in my shoes and come to Horden, to Easington and to the food banks. [Interruption.] Have Conservative Members seen “I, Daniel Blake”? If they have never lived it, it is instructive to try to understand what “digital by default” means. I heard a former Minister, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), say what a wonderful thing digital by default is to incentivise people and prepare them for work, because many job applications have to be made online. That is absolutely true of job applications, but the fundamental difference with universal credit is that in order to remain live, the application has to be updated daily using a smartphone or a PC. Many of my constituents do not have access to PCs and smartphones. Many of them come to my office begging.
for food vouchers, and I am allowed to give only three. It is heartbreaking. They have to choose between heating and eating.

How are they supposed to access computers? We have two large centres in the constituency with libraries. Those on the Government Benches are MPs—probably millionaires with comfortable lifestyles—but they do not understand the everyday trials and tribulations of ordinary working people. That is the problem.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I represent a deprived coastal constituency. I must say, both personally and on behalf of many of my colleagues on the Government Benches, that the idea that we do not listen to our constituents or see the experiences that the hon. Gentleman sees, and the idea that he has a monopoly on compassion, is profoundly offensive.

Grahame Morris: The problem is Government Members’ lack of understanding. The Opposition are calmly and rationally putting forward a solution to pause and fix the problem with the roll-out.

Angela Crawley: Does the hon. Gentleman remember the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), saying that he could afford to live on benefits of however much per week? Does the hon. Gentleman reckon that anyone on the Government Benches would be able to live on thin air for the next six to 12 weeks while universal credit is rolled out?

Grahame Morris: I do recall those remarks, and I do not think it is possible. It would be incredibly instructive if Government Members actually lived on benefits and experienced what it is like.

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern, which I am sure is the concern of many Members present who are due to face roll-out in November, or towards the end of November, that we might end up with constituents with no money for food or heating over Christmas and winter?

Grahame Morris: That is precisely the point that I am trying to make. I am afraid that the heat of the moment has tempted me away from the three things that I wanted to say.

As currently constituted, this system will penalise the poor and do nothing to resolve the underlying issues of low pay, housing costs and insecure employment. In my constituency, the Walkers crisp factory is closing down a month before Christmas. One Member on the Conservative Benches said that fewer than 300 people were unemployed in her constituency. I have more than 300 unemployed people from one factory closure.

The East Durham Trust, which is a tremendous initiative in my constituency, is making up food parcels because the Trussell Trust cannot keep up with demand. It is currently raising money to cook food, because some poor people do not have access to cooking facilities. I want to encourage all the good people—not just those on the Opposition Benches and in my area, but on the Government Benches—to donate to such organisations. The East Durham Trust is trying to raise the modest sum of £10,000, which will be matched by Comic Relief. I was at its 10th anniversary event, celebrating the achievements of the community and voluntary sector.

This terrific event was addressed by the chief executive of the East Durham Trust, Malcom Fallow. He spoke to me about a young boy who was attending the community barbecue, which was trying to feed some of the most deprived and vulnerable families in the community of Peterlee in my constituency. He said that the young boy put a burger in his pocket. When he was challenged about it, he said that he was taking it home to feed his hungry sister. That is an indictment in 2017. It is shameful and it should shame this House. It shames me that, in this great country of ours in 2017, children are going hungry because of a flawed benefit system. It is a system that can be fixed, and we have an opportunity to do that tonight.

Communities such as mine are being forced to create their own food banks to feed their neighbours because the current benefit system— I might say the personal independence payment system as well—is not working. I commend the work of the East Durham Trust; it is a fantastic organisation. However, if this Government showed some compassion and reviewed the system, such organisations may not be so necessary.
any concrete reasons why the scheme should be paused; nor has she done so during this debate. This is an agile system and we are learning. It was first rolled out in Lowestoft in Suffolk, and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) indicated the problems. I have spoken to the DWP leads to ensure that we understand those problems and that we are looking at concrete solutions. The system has to be fair to claimants and taxpayers. Indeed, some claimants are taxpayers. It will always offer challenges, and there is always a case to improve and ask how the system can be made better.

I represent an area where the average wage is below the national average. It is important to understand that the people I meet in my surgeries are not well off and we need to take time to understand their individual circumstances. Although the number of people who are unemployed in my constituency is comparatively low figure 645, those are 645 people whom my everyday work aims to get into employment. That is why I also talk to employers in the engagement groups to which I reach out.

Of the individuals out of work, about 20% struggle to manage their finances for a multitude of reasons, so being simplistic about the problem does no one any favours. For instance, it is likely that single parents are a group with specific needs, and I have spoken to somebody in the police force who is worried about people with addictions. Are the work support coaches allowed to advocate for the payments of rents in difficult circumstances? I also draw people’s attention to the fact that they will get help filling in paper forms, particularly if they have problems using a computer. There were enormous problems in 2003 when tax credits were rolled out. Universal credit is being steadily rolled out—we have spoken to the DWP leads to ensure that we understand its clients on universal credit are now in rent arrears. Is that really the Government’s intention?

Digital by default is proving to be disastrous. It assumes that everyone has easy internet access and is computer literate, which clearly is not the case for many people. Constituents are finding it difficult to make their daily updates, to verify their claims and to post activity on their web activity report, which is necessary to stop their claim being suspended—never mind getting hold of a human being to help when the system goes wrong.

Even when my constituents follow the correct procedures, documentation provided to the DWP at constituents’ cost is being lost or even destroyed. When constituents or my caseworkers contact the DWP to ask quite straightforward questions, the staff do not know the system themselves. How can constituents be expected to navigate the system when staff do not have the correct training and support to assist people who are having difficulties? Let me be clear: this is not the fault of the hard-working staff at jobcentres and the DWP; the blame lies fairly and squarely with the Government, who have their head buried in the sand.

I am pleased that my constituents will no longer be charged 55p per minute to access much needed support, but that change barely scratches the surface of the problems with the system. The crux of the issue is that the Government should be utilising the painful lessons learned by areas such as Newcastle, where the full roll-out of universal credit has been piloted, to ensure that the myriad problems that have arisen are rectified before they roll it out any further. It is causing real hardship and distress.

We are not asking for the system to be scrapped. We are asking for it to be paused, so that the Government can get this complex system right before they roll out further misery, debt and hardship up and down the land.
4.15 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I rise to voice my support for the planned roll-out of universal credit. Universal credit improves lives. It frees people from the benefits trap and empowers them to get back into work. That is supported by evidence. The “Universal Credit at Work” report shows that 71% of people claiming universal credit found work within the first nine months of their claim—a rate that is 8% higher than that of the comparable jobseeker’s allowance claimants. More recent research echoes those findings, with the latest independent research commissioned by the DWP showing that people claiming universal credit on the live service were 3 percentage points more likely to be in work after three months than those claiming JSA, and 4 percentage points more likely to be in work six months after starting their claim. Those percentage differences may sound small, but they are not in the least insignificant. We are talking about many thousands of lives improved by this policy. The independent research paper describes this as a “sizeable impact for a policy of this nature.”

Nobody in this House is denying that there are issues with the system, which must be expected with so large a reform that affects so many people. That is why it was heartening this morning in the Work and Pensions Committee to hear the Secretary of State announce that DWP helplines will all be freephone numbers by the end of this year. We also had assurances from the Secretary of State, first at the Conservative party conference and again this morning in Committee, that more will be done to advertise advance payments and that guidance has been issued to DWP work coaches, who are now proactively offering advance payments to claimants.

Although I am sure Members would join me in expressing slight concern about the amount and quality of data being gathered on advance payments, I believe that today the Secretary of State has proved that he and the Department hear the concerns voiced by many Members of this House, organisations and members of the public, and that they are prepared to act on them. However, that does not mean that we should in any way pause the roll-out. It is much better that the Government proceed cautiously, with a test and learn mentality—learning and improving as we expand universal credit, refining it as we go along cautiously and steadily. That is the correct approach.

I am not going to criticise any Member of this House or any party for raising concerns about such a massive change to the benefits system, whether on mental health issues, waiting times, or digital literacy. They are, as they have done this afternoon, reflecting their genuine concerns and those of their constituents, and that is what we are all here to do. However, some of the more intemperate contributions to the debate, not necessarily here today but elsewhere and at other times, have erred on the side of scaremongering, which is less than constructive and does not help our constituents or our constituents’ families and their children—bearing the brunt of many years of Tory economic failure and austerity cuts.

Mr Seely: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anna McMorrin: No, I will not give way.

The reality is that this accelerated and aggressive roll-out will see an increase in debt, rental arrears, food bank usage, and homelessness—people struggling to make ends meet, with real-life consequences. I know of one family who have had their two children taken into care because they were forced to move into a tent in a park after being evicted when their housing benefit was not paid on time. These children were taken away from their parents not because they were not loved, not because they were not cared for, but because this Government failed them.

It is clear that the current universal credit process is not fit for purpose. It is due to be rolled out in my constituency early in the new year, and I am already getting many people coming to me truly scared about how this is going to affect them. We are seeing an increase in homelessness in Cardiff, especially among young people, with an 18% increase in the past year.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anna McMorrin: No, I will not give way.

We are also seeing 475 needless deaths every year across Wales alone because vulnerable people are unable to afford to heat their homes. Homelessness and fuel poverty are set to get worse under this system. We have a Welsh Labour Government tackling it, but their arms are tied behind their backs with this roll-out of universal credit.

I am deeply concerned about the effect that this will have on single-parent families, who make up one in eight households, with significant hardship through delays, errors, fluctuating payments, and payments in arrears. At a time when child poverty in single-parent families is forecast to sharply increase, this system must be fixed. Do not let homeless, evictions, debts and misery pile up. Do not allow destitution to get worse in the 21st century. The Secretary of State says that he wants to test and improve the system; he should listen to the overwhelming evidence and halt this.

4.18 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate.

As is the case for the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), universal credit is coming to my area in Derbyshire shortly. It will be rolled out to about a quarter of my constituency next month, and according to the current time lines there will be a further roll-out next year. Also, like the hon. Lady, I am getting a number of people coming to me concerned about universal credit. However, what concerns me is some of the language used by Labour Members, and their
scaremongering. It would be better if the hon. Lady did what Conservative Members are trying to do—assuaging people’s concerns, showing them the opportunities, and showing them all the things that have been put in place to make sure that these roll-outs can be done carefully and considerably.

I came here today with an open mind. I have been in the debate since the beginning. I listened to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) as she gave a very heartfelt and measured speech, unlike the Leader of the Opposition earlier in the day. Unfortunately, I am confused about what the Opposition seek to achieve. Yesterday, we were talking about pausing and fixing, but today we are talking about pausing. I have been listening to the Opposition expressing cursory agreement with the principles of universal credit, before launching straight into speeches that completely undermined those principles. The principle that people should have the skills to enable them to get on in the workplace by accessing jobs online was immediately undermined by the speech from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson. She agreed with the argument that we need to ensure that people are prepared for the workplace but rejected the notion that because 70% of workers are paid monthly, we should encourage people to budget on a monthly basis.

I do not agree with many of the Opposition’s arguments, but if Opposition Members are genuine in their wish to convince Conservative Members about those arguments, as I believe many of them are, perhaps the Opposition spokesperson should not seek to undermine the entire principle of universal credit. What she suggests is not a pause, but a delay. Ultimately, the Opposition seek to undermine the system in its entirety—from beginning to end.

I accept that there have been challenges, and I am heartened to hear from Conservative Members about how those challenges have been partially fixed. When universal credit comes to my area, I will be watching it like a hawk, along with my local citizens’ advice bureau, and if there are problems, I will be the first person on the line to the Minister. There are challenges, and this is a test and learn process, but ultimately we have a choice between continuing with a system that will improve things for people, or sticking with the problems that we have today.

4.21 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): What is happening to our country is something of which this Government should be ashamed. This is a country where families cannot feed their children, where people are reliant on the generosity of others and where disabled people face being thrown out on to the streets. We have a Government who do not seem to care, and who continue to push on with their plans regardless. The universal credit roll-out has been a disaster, and it must be halted to make sure all the approach and the day when no employee needs to offer 16 hours of work to anyone will be the day when universal credit has done its job. The reason for this debate, however, is much less clear. I suspect that the changing nature of the motion reflects two problems. The first is that some Opposition Members do not want to fix universal credit, but to destroy it and go back to an earlier world of throwing more money at welfare. The second is that some of them know they cannot fix it, because their own record on tax credits—their big attempt at welfare support—has done its job. The reason for this debate, however, is much less clear. I suspect that the changing nature of the motion reflects two problems. The first is that some Opposition Members do not want to fix universal credit, but to destroy it and go back to an earlier world of throwing more money at welfare. The second is that some of them know they cannot fix it, because their own record on tax credits—their big attempt at welfare reform—was an absolute disaster, for which we are still paying in HMRC’s annual accounts.

We have heard Opposition Members make a series of remarks that are worth repeating: that this is a “disaster about to unfold”; that it shows a “total lack of understanding”; that their constituents have been “driven into destitution”; that it is “a shambles”; and that they are “not making things up”. Let me share with everyone, but especially with Labour Members, exactly who has said:

“Gloucester City Homes has evicted one in eight of all of its tenants.”—[Official Report, 11 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 324.]

That would mean that 650 of my constituents had been evicted over the past year. The actual figure is eight, seven of whom had such large debt arrears before they went on to universal credit that they would have been evicted anyway.

Let me also share with Opposition Members that those figures—eight people evicted during the past year—are a quarter of the number that Gloucester City Homes, when it was the city council housing department, used to evict, on average, every year during the 13 years of the Labour Government. That was without any complaint saying that it is okay for delays in payments, fluctuating payments and administrative errors to cause families to be evicted? That is what families are facing with the disaster that is the roll-out of universal credit.

Councils and housing associations may have shown some leniency over mistakes, but private landlords, in many cases, have not. Two fifths of single-parent families live in privately rented accommodation, so something needs to change. There are 3,411 single-parent families in my constituency. With nearly a third of single parent families already in debt, it is time the Government supported struggling families rather than continuing with the roll-out.

I turn my attention to a different part of our society that is being deeply hurt by this failed roll-out: our disabled constituents. They often have less disposable income, and they are being hit unfairly hard by this scheme. Evidence from Scope, the disabled charity, shows that a household with a disabled person in it is twice as likely to be in debt as a household without a disabled person.

We need to take a long hard look at ourselves, as a country. We should be a country that makes its systems work for those most in need. We should be a country that supports our vulnerable people. We should be a country that works for the many, not the few.

4.24 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): We have all known the reason for universal credit for a long time, and the day when no employee needs to offer 16 hours of work to anyone will be the day when universal credit has done its job. The reason for this debate, however, is much less clear. I suspect that the charging nature of the motion reflects two problems. The first is that some Opposition Members do not want to fix universal credit, but to destroy it and go back to an earlier world of throwing more money at welfare. The second is that some of them know they cannot fix it, because their own record on tax credits—their big attempt at welfare reform—was an absolute disaster, for which we are still paying in HMRC’s annual accounts.

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being made in the House by two Labour MPs or the current Leader of the Opposition, who was here for all that time. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) said that Government Members do not understand what is happening in our constituencies, but I know what is happening in mine, and I do not need the Leader of the Opposition to tell me; and when it comes to making things up, he should stop scaremongering and get his facts right.

Let me turn to the Government, because this policy is incredibly important. It is our philosophy and our project, and we must get it right, and there are things we could all do to help make that happen. In the time remaining—perhaps someone would like to intervene—let me quickly run through those things.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind) rose—

Richard Graham: I am very happy to take an intervention from my friend.

Lady Hermon: That is enormously kind, thoughtful and generous of the hon. Gentleman.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): No, it was not; it was selfish.

Lady Hermon: No, it was very generous, indeed. Given that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) said that almost everything is hunky-dory with the roll-out of universal credit, would he and his colleagues not be astonished if the Government did not push this to a vote? The tweeting going on suggests that the Government are going to abstain, but would he not like to have an opportunity to vote?

Richard Graham: I agree with so much of what the hon. Lady says—I love her constituency—but rather than respond to that point, let me highlight what we can all do to make sure that this is a success.

First, the moment when the landlords portal opens and our housing associations become trusted partners will be absolutely crucial, and we need to know when it is going to happen for which housing associations. Secondly, I believe that if we have a main housing association in our constituency, it needs to have somebody inside the jobcentre and working with it when people move on to universal credit. Thirdly, we need to know how many of our constituents moving on to UC are getting advances. We know the national figure, but we do not know the figure for our constituencies. Fourthly, we need to know when the citizens advice bureau is alerted to a problem by a constituent. I have an escalation protocol with my CAB, and I recommend that to everyone, because it is very important for us to know about such problems as soon as possible. The next thing we need to know—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

4.29 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in today’s important debate.

I know that many Members on both sides of the House share my concerns, but they are also shared by many outside this House. They are shared by organisations at the forefront of supporting people through difficult periods and supporting the most vulnerable in our society, such as Community Housing Cymru, Citizens Advice, Shelter, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Trussell Trust—to name but a few.

Those organisations know at first hand how a system is meant to work and when something is not working, because they are generally the ones picking up the pieces when people’s lives are turned upside down by debt and anxiety, caused at this time by problems with the roll-out of universal credit.

We have heard and will continue to hear throughout the debate evidence that the roll-out causes significant hardship and undue stress. The Government must listen to the genuine concerns from across the country to prevent further hardship. Those concerns do not constitute negativity and scaremongering, as some Conservative Members suggest, but reflect reality.

Clearly, the first thing that needs reconsideration is the six-week waiting period. In most circumstances, people do not have savings or money set aside to cover day-to-day living expenses during that time. Advance payments are not a solution for claimants who cannot wait a minimum of six weeks for their first payment, as they cover only part of the claim and must be repaid through a deduction from future payments. In most circumstances, an advance payment will not cover the costs of a tenant’s rent, leading to arrears, claimants needing to use food banks, and to increasing debt and poverty.

I understand from some housing providers that they often receive conflicting messages from DWP staff while those staff are gaining the full knowledge and skills to administer the new system. A pause and period of reflection would allow the Government to address issues with the helpline, and offer training and support to DWP staff to ensure consistency of information for both tenant and landlord.

With the proposed roll-out being accelerated significantly from this month, it stands to reason that the problems identified so far will be magnified, leading to thousands of families facing an uncertain time in the run-up to Christmas and well into the new year. If the system is creaking now, rolling out at the proposed pace will make matters a lot worse.

In my view and that of many colleagues in this place and outside, the Government need urgently to reconsider the roll-out to address the very real concerns, undue hardship and anxiety that the policy is causing and look at how it can be improved.

4.31 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I hope that the Minister and my other hon. Friends will bear with me if I quote the National Audit Office’s withering analysis of Government failure:

“the systems do not work as intended, causing problems for claimants, employers and the Department… there were serious problems with system performance… which affected stability; speed; and availability.”

The roll-out caused massive payment problems and huge knock-on impacts throughout the system. The NAO’s words were an indictment of colossal failure.
My hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench will be relieved to hear that the report was written in 2003, when the introduction of the tax credit regime by the Labour Administration gave us a perfect example of how not to do it.

I support this Administration’s purposeful roll-out of universal credit, which allows time to test, learn and rectify. No one can genuinely accuse the Government of rushing headlong into a scheme that is taking a decade to roll out.

When I speak to people in my local Jobcentre Plus, I hear genuine enthusiasm for universal credit, and recognition that the agile system is improving with every roll-out and becoming more user-friendly.

Let us not forget the complaints from hon. Members of all parties about the clunkiness and adverse consequences—still much in evidence around the country—of the former system. Let us not forget its consequences—still much in evidence around the country—of the former system.

At its most basic, universal credit helps individuals into work, allowing them to keep more of the income that they earn. Those on UC are more likely to enter the workplace within six months than their peers with the same qualifications and characteristics on JSA. Universal credit is about not just getting people into work, but what happens when they are there.

I pay tribute to the shadow Secretary of State for remaining here throughout the debate. She quoted from a report by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions. However, she did not choose to quote from its report on in-work progression, which made it clear that universal credit has “the potential to be the most significant welfare reform since 1948... It promises to break the cycle of people stuck in low pay, low prospects employment.”

All that is not to say that the system is perfect. Of course, there will be issues, some heartrending, that need to be resolved. However, that is true of every benefits system, and certainly true of the predecessor that universal credit replaces. The difference is that universal credit, as well as being right in principle, has proved itself adaptable and responsive: 50% of new claimants securing advances; the new landlord portal referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith); and the consistent improvement in the time it takes to make payments. They are all examples of how the system is adapting. It is a system worth working with.

4.34 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I know I have not been here for long, but I am having difficulty believing my ears when I hear some of the stories from my hon. Friends who have already had this system rolled out in their constituencies. I am astounded by what I hear from some on the Opposition Benches who are scaremongering. It leaves me to genuinely wonder what colour the sky is in their world. But I stand here thankful to represent my constituents, and to stand up for a better Gower and a better Wales for our children to grow up in.

I took a bit of a bashing on Twitter this week, because I said the Government had shown a lack of empathy when it came to universal credit. As a former teacher, I love to learn and I am happy to be proved wrong, so I call on the Government to show empathy now. This is a chance for the Government to show that they have listened to the serious concerns that many Members have raised today. I hope they will show empathy, so that my constituents, who will have universal credit rolled out just before Christmas, will not have to hang over their heads during the holidays. Who will my constituents turn to when they need to apply for their “loan” and the offices that provide support are closed? How will the DWP staff cope in that short period of time with such requests in addition to their normal duties?

I already have working people coming to my constituency office helpless and looking for a referral to the food bank to feed their children. What will it be like at Christmas when council figures estimate that people in work in Swansea will be £42 a week worse off? All I ask is that the Government show some empathy to the parents who need to juggle childcare and work as they try to provide the best they can for their children and families. Show empathy and give a more compassionate start date to the roll-out of universal credit in Gower and Swansea.

All the evidence shows that the roll-out of universal credit will see in-work poverty soar. There is a wealth of evidence from across the country that where universal credit has been introduced evictions are up, the use of food banks is up and the number of people in in-work poverty is up. Significant changes are needed. I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). She is right when she says that those of us on the Opposition Benches—see how many of us are here—are not making it up. The Government need to consider a pause.

4.37 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have been following the progress of universal credit since its inception about 10 years ago. The shadow Secretary of State asked, at the start of her remarks, how did we get here? How did we get to a place where there is a new benefit system on the table whose principles are agreed by most in this House? Those principles have been agreed because they make sense and because the welfare system we inherited was a disaster. It has been a disaster since its birth in 2003: it cost £1.9 billion in errors, left hundreds of thousands of people with too little money and created a system that paid people not to take work. It left people worse off if they took on more work. We saw a taper rate that left only 4p in the pound when some people worked more than 16 hours a week. This was and is a benefit system that spends tens of billions of pounds to discourage people from working more hours. It is a disgrace and it needs to be replaced.

From those key mistakes, universal credit has learnt how to roll out a benefit and what sort of benefit to build. The sort of benefit to build is one that encourages
people to move into work and to take on more work when they do; and one that has a taper rate that leaves people not with 4p in the pound, but 37p. It is a system that has learned from its predecessor. In particular, an important lesson has been learned about how to introduce a big new benefit. There is no big bang in the system. This is a “test and learn” process. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, we are moving from 8% roll-out to 10% roll-out at the start of next year, meaning that the system is evolving all the time. We are seeing its evolution before our eyes. We saw it today with the change to the phone lines. We have seen it with the advance payments system and the eligibility criteria for people to get their payments paid directly to landlords. Those are all improvements.

Hon. Members must understand, however, that we cannot have a “test and learn” environment if we are not testing. We have before us an opportunity to roll out a system slowly and get it right. Opposition Members want a pause. There has just been a pause in the summer—no new jobcentres were taken on in August and September—and there will be another pause in January. The pauses are built into the system already, and the system is using them as opportunities to develop. Labour introduced a benefit in 2003 that was a mess, and it introduced it badly, and now it is trying to make a mess of its successor.

4.40 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I am surprised by the intensity of the controversy that has crept into this debate. The Labour party and the Scottish nationalists say they support the principles behind universal credit—that will have implications for how it operates—and the Liberal Democrats actually helped to introduce it, yet we have this degree of controversy. Of course, we have heard hard stories today, but let us be clear: the existing system produces hard stories. In my constituency, every time there is a “take up of benefit” campaign, we find that people are losing out on millions of pounds of benefits because the system is so complicated. A new system that helps to reduce that complexity is bound to help people in hardship.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I have been a constituency MP for the last seven years, and since the roll-out of universal credit, I have seen more people come to my advice surgeries with problems about getting their universal credit, and that includes people who are working.

Sammy Wilson: If we added up the number of people who come with tax credit and benefit problems and so on, I guarantee we would find the same level of dissatisfaction with the existing system.

I accept that there are problems with the new system, but we have to give some credit to the Government for listening. We have raised several issues in our discussions. There were the online difficulties, and we now have free telephone calls. There were difficulties with people not having money, and we now have greater access to early payments. There were difficulties with the learning processes, and the Secretary of State said twice today that he did not intend to rush the system so that he could test, learn and rectify.

Lady Hermon: Instead of praising the Government for what they have done today, the hon. Gentleman, I suggest, should turn his mind to the situation in Northern Ireland. We have no functioning Assembly or responsible Ministers to deal with any of the problems that will arise when universal credit is rolled out across Northern Ireland. May I urge him to give a commitment to the House that his party will get together with Sinn Féin, which makes such a song and dance about welfare reform, and restore the Assembly as a priority?

Sammy Wilson: I am surprised that the hon. Lady, as a Unionist, has not identified where the real problem lies in reforming the Government in Northern Ireland—with Sinn Féin. We are happy to enter government tomorrow with no preconditions to sort out these problems.

That brings me neatly to the point I want to make. When universal credit was first suggested—I was a member of the Executive at the time—we sat down and identified what we felt the issues would be. Even without a functioning Executive in Northern Ireland, changes have already been made in the system there which I believe will show that some of the difficulties that have been raised here today can be dealt with. For example, automatic direct payments to landlords are built into the system. I do not accept the argument that it is good to give tenants money for rent so that they can then pay it back. The money is not part of disposable income; it has to be used for a specific purpose, and therefore there is no reason why it cannot be paid directly. That is what will happen in Northern Ireland, and I suspect that we will not have the same level of rent arrears. If that proves to be the case as universal credit is rolled out, I trust that the Minister will learn from it, and will rectify the system in the rest of the United Kingdom.

It was said earlier that 76% of people in the United Kingdom are now paid monthly, but those on low incomes are usually paid on a weekly or two-weekly basis. The first thing that many of my friends on low incomes do when they start a new job is ask for a sub in the first week, because they cannot manage otherwise. For that reason, I hope that what we have decided in Northern Ireland will eventually be replicated in Great Britain, and payments will be made on a two-weekly basis unless people ask to be paid monthly. We recognise that domestic violence is an issue, and that some people may be afraid to ask for the money, especially if they are caring for children. A split-payment system must therefore be considered.

If there is a vote this evening, we will abstain, not because we do not believe that there are problems, but because we believe that it is better to talk to the Government and look for solutions. Let me say this to Labour Members. They know that there are differences between us and the Government—and at times they try to exploit those differences—but we will not be used for the purpose of headline-grabbing defeats of Government flagship policies, rather than trying to find a way of resolving the issues that need to be addressed.

4.47 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is the hallmark of a fair welfare system that it includes a strong and effective way of helping people who are out of work to find employment, and, by doing so, allows them to enjoy the dignity,
confidence and self-reliance that comes with the ability to provide for themselves and their families. In that regard, we should never take the Government’s achievement since 2010 for granted. There are 3 million more people in work, unemployment in my constituency has halved, and our national unemployment rate is half that of the eurozone.

None of that happened by accident. It happened as a result of the hard work done by companies large and small, and as a result of carefully calibrated Government policy. That progress could—and, I believe, would—be undone in an instant were the shadow Chancellor ever to have an opportunity to unleash his programme of hundreds of billions of pounds of unfunded spending, and nationalisation with Parliament determining “fair compensation” for shareholders, all in the context of a crippling loss of investor confidence and a run on the pound. Despite the progress that we have seen, however, there is further to go, and that is precisely why I support universal credit. Its purpose is to deliver fundamental reform, and to replace a contradictory, and sometimes impossible, set of conflicting benefits with a single simplified payment.

The key question to ask about any policy is “What incentives does it create?” In the case of universal credit, the policy aligns the incentives so that work always pays. In my constituency, too many lives have been blighted for far too long by joblessness. I challenge Opposition Members to go to a ward such as Park End or Hemlington, and then tell me that it is wrong to end the perverse situation that we inherited whereby some people were losing £9 out of every extra £10 that they earned, which left them with virtually no incentive to work.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What would the hon. Gentleman say to the nearly 7,000 families in his constituency who currently claim tax credit, and who, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, will be £2,500 a year worse off under universal credit?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am more than happy to allow interventions, but if Members who choose to intervene want to look a colleague in the eye when that colleague drops off the list of speakers, let them do so, because that is what is going to happen.

Mr Clarke: In answer to the question, I would tell them that—as I would defend to anybody—this Government are creating jobs and, through their changes to taxes and benefits, making life better.

The fact that I have been elected to serve my constituency shows that people in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland see through what the Opposition are trying to do. They talk of a pause, but instead they are in effect asking for indefinite delay and the slow death of this policy. That is the reality of what we are seeing here. They talk a good game about supporting the principle, but in reality they oppose it. They should be more open with us and their constituents about that, because the legacy of the last Labour Government was shameful. The real moral outrage was the thousands of people who ended up being trapped on out-of-work benefits for the entire course of the last decade of Labour’s time in office, and it did nothing about it.

We are offering the solutions. We are listening and learning, and making changes—consider the advance payments, consider the alternative payment methods, consider the landlord portal. Ministers are listening. This system is capable of reform. No system is perfect; given the challenge we are confronting here, I do not believe any system could be perfect. The point is whether this system is capable of improvement, and it is. The Government are listening, and we should get behind them, make this work and stop scaring our constituents with stories which will cause many of them to lose sleep tonight, not to look for work.

4.51 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): My mum was 94 yesterday. When she came to London in 1947 as a young woman, the cards in the windows said, “No blacks, no Irish, no dogs.” There are no cards in the windows in London any longer, but there is an understanding among landlords that they do not take people on universal credit, and they are beginning to evict their tenants who are on housing benefit.

I do not say that one system is perfect and the other is imperfect. I congratulate the Government on the changes they have made today. Those have, in part, come about because of the force of the Opposition, as is our job. The House is doing its job today: however rancorous or angry it becomes, it is doing its job and making improvements.

More needs to be done, however, and that is why we need a delay. We must not be in a position where nearly a third of families with children in London live in private rented accommodation and will be on a benefit, even if they are in work, for the rest of their lives to meet their private rent, and where the application will take six to eight weeks to be determined. In that time, they will receive a section 21 notice from their landlord, who will start the eviction process, deciding that these families, who are perfectly good tenants in every other way, are simply not worth the trouble. Given that on top of that there are plenty of families in London who can pay the enormous rents, there will always be an alternative.

I assure the House that I am not trying to frighten people or talk about things that do not happen. I recently went to a private landlords forum in my borough and none of them said they were prepared to let to people on universal credit, because they simply did not want to wait for their rent.

We have talked about other people helping people to get advance payments. At present, local authorities have an officer responsible for preventing homelessness. If I see somebody at my surgery who is behind with their housing benefit, I get on the phone and say, “Steve, will you go down to housing benefit and get the staff there to sort it, or else the landlord will have them out,” and he does that. We do not have something identical to that in this system at present, and on behalf of London and all private tenants on benefit I say: please stop it, look at it and do something about it.

4.54 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I support the principles behind universal credit. My question is this: why are we undermining a policy with the potential to change lives for the better by not addressing a fundamental flaw at its heart?
We have heard many compelling cases today, and we cannot ignore them. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) set out one of the flaws, but we have seen that a policy of test, learn and rectify can work. Today there have been universal congratulations for the Government on the introduction of a free helpline, and the bringing forward of access to advances has also improved the policy, but that does not get us away from the fundamental problem of a minimum six-week wait. That means that our constituents who are living on the edge—we are talking about real people’s lives here—are going to start this process in debt and in arrears, as we have heard.

It is possible to apply test, learn and rectify to this process. I want to hear from the Minister in the winding-up speech that Front Benchers recognise that and that they are going to address the six-week wait. The advance does not solve the issue; it does not cover the entire amount. Those of us who represent our constituents have a cushion and we would probably manage, but many of the people I used to look after when I was in clinical practice and the people I represent now who come to my constituency surgeries have no cushion whatever. This is devastating for them, and we cannot ignore the very real, compelling case histories that we have heard. We cannot allow those to continue.

There are things that we can do. Bringing forward the initial payment would mean that fewer people needed advances in the first place. That would save us a complicated bureaucracy, allowing people to say for themselves when they start universal credit, “Please would you pay my landlord direct, because I know I am going to find that complicated? Please would you give me payments every fortnight, because I don’t currently receive monthly payments?” Once they are established on the system, give them, with their advisers, the option to transfer to taking over their own monthly payments for their rent.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that that would be sensible not only from an administrative point of view, but because work coaches could be helping people get into work, rather than helping them to deal with debt, stress and mental health issues?

Dr Wollaston: I absolutely agree. I say to the Minister, please, can we hear an assurance at least that there is a recognition of this fundamental flaw and that it will be addressed?

I know that Members on this side of the House will be abstaining tonight. Personally, I do not agree with that. The House should have an opportunity to express its view, and there have been occasions on which these debates, even though they are advisory, have led to changes in policy. If there is no way for me to express my view, on behalf of my constituents, that I think this fundamental flaw must be addressed before the policy is rolled out to the Totnes constituency next year, I am afraid that I will have to vote against the Government. I do not wish to do that because I support the underlying policy of universal credit—we have heard about many of its benefits—but, I say again, we are undermining it by not addressing the fundamental flaw at its heart. I hope the Minister will give an assurance from the Dispatch Box so that I do not have to vote against the Government.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Today, I hope to give the House an insider’s look at what it can be like for a single parent relying on the benefit system. I became a single parent when my son, who is six, was 14 months old. I was working as a teacher and had no option but to drop my hours and apply for working tax credit. I experienced the process of benefit delay and went many weeks focusing on feeding my son meals while I survived off cereal.

During that difficult time, I felt the pressure of trying to manage my bills and make my rent commitments while always trying to remain a strong and capable parent for my child. I cannot stress enough how tough life can feel as a single parent. Not only are you dealing with the trauma of a failed relationship and the difficult process of everyone involved adjusting to the new circumstances, but many, like me, can find themselves in extreme financial difficulty where it is easy to become trapped in a spiral of debt and benefit uncertainty while juggling child care.

I find it heartbreaking to hear stories from my constituents, who come to me with similar problems due to universal credit. Take Sarah, for example. She was advised by the universal credit helpline to register that her relationship had ended and was assured that that would not close her claim. However, that advice was incorrect and her claim was closed, meaning that she had to go through the entire process again. Rent arrears then built up, and Sarah had to take out a loan to help her get through. Without the support of her family, she would have fallen apart—without the support of my family, I would have fallen apart. What about those people who do not have that support? With around a third of single parents already in debt before the roll-out of universal credit, how can the Government justify a policy that threatens more financial insecurity?

Then we have the patronising insinuation from the Government Benches that getting people used to monthly pay to prepare them for work and the management of their own budgets is easily achievable. That is typical of the approach taken by a party that refuses to accept that its own ideology could possibly be flawed. Instead, it seeks to condition human behaviour so that people are nudged into acting rationally. Convinced that our society cannot be broken, the Conservatives preach from their positions of privilege about the need to change behaviours instead of attempting to make any meaningful change to the structures within our society that leave millions of people impoverished, but leave their own people richer than ever.
Universal credit is “an important tool for tackling poverty”.

Those are not my words, but those of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation from April this year. In Scotland, the current Minister for Social Security, Jeanette Freeman MSP, expressed disappointment last year that the completion date was as far back as 2022, so I find it strange that the SNP supports the halting of the roll-out today.

Universal credit is of particular importance to me because my constituency has a higher than average rate of unemployment, particularly among young people, and I am determined to see that rate reduce over the lifetime of this Parliament. Fortunately, universal credit is ensuring that more claimants are looking for and, crucially, succeeding in finding work than under jobseeker’s allowance. In 2015, 86% of those on universal credit were actively looking to work more hours, compared with only 38% under jobseeker’s allowance. The reason behind that is simple: JSA punished people who were looking to work more hours, but universal credit is designed to promote increased working hours.

However, we have to recognise that any major reform such as this will be challenging for users. The SNP should know all about roll-out issues—dare I mention the ongoing common agricultural policy payments fiasco in Scotland? This Government will adapt to ensure that any issues are addressed. It is of course right and proper that the Government take on the points being made about implementation and work to fix the issues that could see a good policy get damaged in the public eye through flawed delivery. Some have suggested today that universal credit makes claimants more likely to enter rent arrears, but clearly no one wants a policy to fail.

There is still some way to go before we can call this policy an unmitigated success, but the worst thing we could do is abandon or pause a policy that is helping people into work and return to a broken system that gave up on the unemployed when they most needed the Government’s help. After all, work is the most effective route out of poverty. It rewards the individual and allows them to regain purpose, routine and responsibility, enabling both society and the economy to prosper.

Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): This month, universal credit will be rolled out in full across South Lanarkshire, which includes my constituency. In October 2015, when I served as a South Lanarkshire councillor, universal credit was first introduced for newly unemployed single claimants. By the end of that year, 48% of council tenants in receipt of universal credit were in arrears, with a total of £65,000 outstanding. Not only did that put pressure on people’s lives; it also put pressure on a local authority already struggling under this Government’s austerity policy. I am dismayed that, two years later, the Government appear to have learned nothing from that experience. New claimants are still finding themselves in debt and arrears because, as we have heard many times, people are still waiting at least six weeks to receive payment.

Advance payments are repayable loans. For the six months that people will be paying them back, they will be expected to live on less than has been calculated for them to survive. That six-week delay assumes that everything goes smoothly with the application, which does not always happen. Some people are waiting far longer and find themselves significantly worse off after moving on to the full service.

What about those who do not have the IT skills or internet access to be able to apply online? They can go to a library or a jobcentre if they are still open, but that is not an option for many. Although I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision to scrap helpline call charges, there are significant issues with the quality of advice when people do get through, particularly because of the complex calculations involved. There is no point in the advice being free if it is incorrect. That is not a criticism of DWP staff, who are working very hard in difficult circumstances.

In many cases we are talking about whole families, often with complex needs, who are already in a difficult financial position and who are turning to the state for an extra bit of support, only to find themselves struggling to provide basic essentials. There are expected to be 1,150 new service claimants in my constituency between now and January. What advice should I give those constituents in the run-up to Christmas and beyond? Should I tell them that they might be forced into debt but that this is a learning process and the Government hope to use their experience to get it right eventually?

We already know what the issues are, and the Government already know what the issues are. We are talking about people’s lives, not a test and learn exercise. Credit unions, churches, housing associations, councils and food banks—how many more organisations will it take? How many more families do the Government need to hear from before they listen and pause this roll-out?

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Welfare is naturally a great concern for anyone who receives welfare payments, especially if there is to be a transition from one system to another, but it is also a big concern for people who fund the system, and not a great deal has been said about people who actually pay their taxes. I appreciate that people on universal credit also pay taxes, but there will be unemployed, employed and underemployed people in the system. All groups in society have to think that the welfare system is reasonable and just. There are many problems with the legacy system, and it needs to change.

The question is whether universal credit is, in all ways, the right system, and there are challenges for universal credit to overcome, but in the current system there is too much chance of people being written off or reaching the 16-hour cliff edge. If people reach 16 hours, they no longer have the incentive to work additional hours. How much money would an employer want to spend on training a person who works 16 hours a week? How much experience does that person get? A person with relatively little training and relatively little experience has relatively little chance of getting a promotion. We ought to change the system to universal credit, which does not stop people working extra hours, getting training and experience, and perhaps then getting that promotion.

For people who work erratic, relatively few hours that increase and decrease, it is challenging in the current system to keep up with the paperwork that entails...
for six different benefits. That is a huge problem for people. We do not want people to look at the system and think, “You know what, if I take those extra hours this week, it will be a logistical nightmare to fill in all the paperwork and everything else to get myself back up to speed.” In the current system people choose not to take extra hours for a variety of reasons, as well as because of the 16-hour cliff edge. We need a system that is easy to navigate. We need a system where people who might be concerned about losing their job can say, “Actually, there is a good safety net. There is a system that will look after me in my time of need.” But there are challenges to address and we need that test, learn and rectify approach in place. The Government are demonstrating it with a slow roll-out, with the progress on advance payments and with the fantastic decision today to have free calls to the system.

5.10 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): My cautionary tale from Croydon is similar to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle). People in my constituency were among the first to experience the full service roll-out of UC back in 2015, and the size of Croydon means that our borough has the highest case load in the country. In Croydon, we have seen UC’s problems play out slowly over time, and the results make my weekly surgeries a very difficult place to be. Conservative Members have talked at length about the test, learn and rectify regime. My constituents have been tested, but I have seen no learning and no rectifying from Conservative Members.

As my colleagues have said, in many ways and giving many strong examples, the DWP takes weeks to assess a claim, and when my constituents are finally paid, getting backdated payments is like pulling teeth. In Croydon, two thirds of people living in local authority housing who claim UC are in rent arrears and at risk of eviction—that is more than 1,000 families. That is just a proportion of the overall figure, as many more are facing the same fate in private rented housing. Conservative Members have suggested that the situation was just as bad before UC was introduced, but in Croydon the average rent account balance for tenants on housing benefit was £2,50, whereas for those on UC it is now minus £1,224.

The problem is not just that delays to payment cause debt, that mistakes are made and that communication is rubbish, and that it takes months to respond to evidence provided and months to pay what is owed; the biggest problem for my constituents is that when all the benefits were lumped together, with a laudable aim, the Government also trimmed the components, leaving my constituents with not enough money to live on. Universal credit is not enough to live on in Croydon. One of my constituents, a single mother who lives on her own after fleeing domestic violence, has been left with a £400 rent shortfall under the new system. The damage this programme has had on our town has meant that families are leaving because they cannot afford to stay. I met headteachers and the council last week, and they told me that primary school numbers in Croydon are now going down, as a direct result of the implementation of UC.

Can I finish with one—[Interruption.] No, I cannot, because I have run out of time. I just ask Conservative Members to vote with us today and pause UC.

5.13 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Opposition have chosen the subject of UC for this debate, as it has allowed many Conservative Members to address the various deliberate misinterpretations that have been proffered by some Opposition Members. I, for one, welcome the fact that UC is available in more than 100 jobcentres across the country and laud the Government for reiterating their commitment to having it available in all jobcentres from September 2018. Under the old system it often made sense for people to work for no more than 16 hours a week. How can any Member believe that was good for the country’s economic health or for an individual struggling in work? That is beyond me. It is simply bad for people who are stuck on benefits and bad for taxpayers, who end up paying more. It cultivates resentment and social division, and creates an incredibly negative benefits culture. Unlike Opposition Members, I am in favour of creating a fair and balanced system. Some of the claims and attacks on UC made by Opposition Members seem to miss the point entirely: this system is designed to cultivate work and help people not to be reliant on benefits. Research has shown that claimants on UC are more likely to move into work than those who are claiming JSA, meaning UC is helping those people become better off. Universal credit encourages people to eschew benefit dependency and assimilate better into the world of work.

It is worth addressing the system’s potential. It is clear that it will undergo tweaks and challenges as it is rolled out nationally, but no ambitious policy is perfect at its conception, and few are perfect even at their implementation. Nevertheless, universal credit has the potential to be a real game changer for how we look at benefits and assist people into work and to reach their full working potential. The Government have purposefully managed a careful and controlled universal credit roll-out, and I am sure that they will continue to look into any issues that appear, as they have done so far.

Labour’s goal seems to be to keep poor people on welfare, rather than to join the debate on how we create a society in which as many people as possible are able to work and as few as possible are reliant on handouts. Conservative Members are pragmatists and welcome sensible contributions from other parties about the honing of a welfare system that elevates those who are struggling rather than accepts the status quo. Universal credit is simple and fair and will be effective for the whole country.

5.15 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I shall highlight a few constituency cases before I address a more substantive issue.

I would like to talk about the £33,000 in rent arrears for just 57 new single Tenant housing association claimants. The Minister should know that none of them have received their payment within the six-week target.

I would like to discuss Bridgeton citizens advice bureau, one of whose clients is a single female aged 45 with existing anxiety and depression. She has been sanctioned four times and has had no money since 5 March.
I would like to talk about my vulnerable constituents: a man with mental health issues being supported by his partner—and they have a baby. They got into rent arrears of more than £1,000 because universal credit was £314.66 short of the rent for their emergency homeless accommodation.

I would like to talk about the £143,833 arrears faced by Glasgow City Council’s homeless services, for 73 claimants. That number has been and is increasing as more people move on to universal credit.

I would like to talk in particular about the two-child policy, because if ever there was an argument for pausing the roll-out of universal credit, this is it. I was glad to see yesterday that the Child Poverty Action Group was given permission to apply for a judicial review of the policy. If the court finds, as it has found before, that real misery is being caused to no good purpose, I hope the Government will not waste yet more public money on appealing the decision.

On universal credit in Northern Ireland, the advice on the UK Government website says that if someone wants to make a claim under the non-consensual sex exemption—using the form I have in my hand—they should make contact by phone or online, or collect a form from their work coach. In Northern Ireland, under the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, anybody to whom a claim of rape is made has a legal duty to report that crime to the police. That duty falls not only on the work coach and the DWP, but on the third-party referrer—the doctor, nurse, social worker or sexual violence support worker has to report that crime to the police. Women in Northern Ireland should not face the choice of being forced into a criminal justice situation, which may make them feel not safe from a former partner, and putting food in their children’s mouths. That is no choice at all. The Government must pause the roll-out, particularly to save women in Northern Ireland from that danger.

The non-consensual sex exemption form is absolutely clear. It says:

“Please be aware that in Northern Ireland, if the third party knows or believes that a relevant offence (such as rape) has been committed, the third party will normally have a duty to inform the police of any information that is likely to secure, or to be of material assistance in securing the apprehension, prosecution or conviction of someone for that offence.”

Universal credit must be paused and fixed now. It is not safe for women in Northern Ireland.

5.18 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am fortunate to have served on the Work and Pensions Committee since my election in 2015, and that has given me a really detailed understanding of universal credit. To reiterate my question to the Prime Minister last week, I believe that universal credit will be the most significant positive transformation of the benefit system in decades. The principles of universal credit are different and the support provided by work coaches is different, but that must not detract from the concerns that I and many Members from across the House have with the design of universal credit. I am disappointed that the Government did not pause the roll-out of this service while some of the system build flaws are resolved, but the Secretary of State has already given the commencement order, and that moment has passed. There is, however, another one-month roll-out delay in January, so all eyes will be on that.

I want to focus my efforts now on convincing Ministers that there are easy and relatively inexpensive ways of improving the design. I wish to put on record my thanks to the Prime Minister for meeting me and colleagues yesterday afternoon to hear our proposals. We were joined by the Secretary of State, and I am positive that we were genuinely listened to and that there was a shared determination to make improvements.

The biggest single criticism of universal credit is the time it takes for people to receive their first payment. Although I appreciate the announcement that advance payments will be made available to all, it is clear to me that, as the number of people requesting these is already rising, it must mean that the inbuilt six-week wait does not work. If we want universal credit really to replicate the world of work, payments must be built around a four-week cycle. Removing the initial seven-day wait must be the very least we can do. At a minimal sum of £150 million to £200 million a year, this would be an inexpensive fix that would benefit all claimants.

Rather than developing another system to prop up a flawed system, let us stop convincing ourselves that advance payments are the answer. Of course there will always be vulnerable claimants who will need financial support today, and, for them, advance payments have an important role, but if, today, more than 50% of claimants have taken up an advance payment—that is before the Secretary of State has said he will advertise them more widely—we must accept that there is a reason that that percentage is so high. Let us stop administering and paying out advance payments hand over fist and reduce the default waiting time for all awards to fortnightly payments at two and four weeks from the moment of a claim. Let us keep paying fortnightly until the work coach and claimant together decide that being paid monthly is okay, and let housing payments go direct to landlords. That would dramatically reduce the number of families going into rent arrears, turning to food banks and spiralling further into debt.

Having discussed this personally with the Prime Minister—I would appreciate another 20 seconds if somebody could give me some time, please. Will anybody intervene? No.

Stephen Lloyd rose—

Heidi Allen: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Lloyd: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I concur with a lot of what she is saying. Like many Members on both sides of the House, does she agree that the principle of universal credit can work if those two or three key changes are made? Without those changes, it will collapse.

Heidi Allen: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. I agree that we risk undermining the success of the system if we do not get these basic things right.

Having discussed this matter personally with the Prime Minister yesterday, it is probably too ambitious to expect a response just yet, but I am confident that she will consider our proposals. Why? Because as well as being the smart thing to do, it is the compassionate thing to do.
Two years ago, almost to the day, I made my maiden speech:

“a country and its economy does not function...if the people who run the engine cannot afford to operate it. We need every teaching assistant, care worker, cleaner and shop worker”—[Official Report, 20 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 874.]

to secure our economic future. With Brexit looming, the call could not be more clarion than it was when I said it two years ago. To pull ourselves out of debt, we should not be forcing working families into it.

5.23 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Just three and a half months ago, I came into this place with two main aims: to make life better for the people I represent; and to stand up for the most vulnerable and those in need. I know that those aims are shared by my hon. Friends on the Labour Benches, and probably by hon. Members on other Benches, too.

Unfortunately, three and a half months into my time as an MP for Weaver Vale, what has become absolutely clear is that, when it comes to universal credit, these aims and values are not shared by the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State or the Government. Indeed, those values are wilfully ignored and, every single day that universal credit is allowed to continue in its current form, there will be considerable problems.

My issue is not with the aim of the policy itself—we can see the value in the basic principles of universal credit and what it is trying to achieve—and nor is our dispute with the staff at our local jobcentres. Yes, I have visited my local jobcentre, and some are doing everything they can to support residents in circumstances that are not of their making or of their choosing. Our argument is with this Government, who are overseeing a shambolic implementation that is causing delays, confusion, distress and debt. Our concern is for the thousands of residents and families who are faced with hardship—and, in some cases, hunger and homelessness—while this Government carry on regardless, ignoring the effects of their policy on the people of Weaver Vale and this nation.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Amesbury: No, I will not.

The Government are ignoring the effects of the policy on people such as Lucy, who was forced to take wage slips to the local jobcentre after a catalogue of errors from Government Departments meant that her payments were miscalculated. Lucy was left in arrears for rent and council tax, with no money for food for weeks on end. Her request for an advance payment—hon. Members have mentioned advance payments—was ignored. Indeed, she was told that “this is happening to quite a lot of people.”

Lucy said to me:

“I have a daughter, I am a single parent trying to make an honest living, and this is how I am being treated.”

No Government, especially a Government who claim to be building a country “that works for everyone”, should hear those words and refuse to take action.

5.26 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): One of the advantages of having been elected to represent St Albans four times since 2005 is that I have a very long grievance and complaints database, as my husband keeps reminding me. I remember only too well the communications on working tax credit that came into my postbag when I first came to the House. People were getting requests for payback of £5,000 or £6,000, pushing their families into absolute misery. It made me realise that the system introduced by Labour was utterly broken. Since then, we have had to try to find a way to simplify the system.

The Secretary of State made an excellent speech. We need to say that universal credit is the way forward. Pausing it today—I understand that the Order Paper now reads “pause”, rather than “pause and fix” as it did yesterday—or halting it, as I notice the Scots nats say, would, in effect, be a wrecking proposal. If that is what the Opposition want to do, despite hearing all the pronouncements that this is a good system, they would be sending totally the wrong message.

The Government are in listening mode, and we are having a slow roll-out. It is excellent that there is autonomy over payments for housing rentals. There are 1,300 people on the housing list in St Albans, and people say to me, “I try to rent properties, but nobody will rent to me as soon as they know I’m in receipt of housing benefit.” At least this way they can take control of their own system. I am pleased that if people find themselves in difficulty, there is a way for universal credit to be paid directly to their landlord. As far as I am concerned, that is a belt and braces approach.

The Government need to listen to the concerns that have been raised, but—for goodness’ sake—we have had 10 years of trying to get away from Labour’s totally flawed system that left people multiple thousands of pounds in debt and squabbling in bureaucracies. Believe me, trying to get on those phone lines was a nightmare. There are teething issues, but—please, please—let us listen to them and learn from them, exactly as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said we are doing. Let us have a slow, learning roll-out.

For whatever reason—and in a non-binding vote for the Government—Members should not side with this Opposition motion, when the Opposition flip-flopped overnight about what they actually wanted to do. They are showing that what they really want is to revert to the totally flawed system that caused misery to many of my constituents. That is what will happen if the universal credit roll-out is halted or paused.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The time limit for speeches is now down to two minutes.

5.29 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, where universal credit is already in place and therefore not being rolled out, I am seeing for myself not only the effects of implementation and the six-week delays, but the damaging effect of the drive to passport constituents in receipt of other benefits on to universal credit at any and every opportunity. I have seen people in the most desperate circumstances—starving, suicidal, broke and broken. I have seen people worried about keeping a roof over their head, and families in poverty, forced to use food banks. It is not just my office that has seen an increase in casework; so has the citizens advice bureau and other agencies.
Currently, 768 single parents living in Hartlepool claim universal credit. Universal credit was rolled out in Hartlepool in December 2016 and its implementation has continued to cause real difficulty and suffering ever since. The case study of Laura described by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) is similar to one in my constituency. The Government need to listen to people like Laura and the thousands of others negatively affected up and down the country by this punitive programme of implementation. Pause it and fix it.

5.30 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Listening to this afternoon’s debate, I have been disappointed by the relentless negativity from Opposition Members. I am sure that all of us, on both sides of the House, spend the majority of our constituency time receiving complaints from constituents, as well as the expert advice bureau in my constituency, the food bank, the jobcentres and local councils about many issues, including universal credit. They have reported back to me that universal credit is working well in my area and across Kent—[Interruption.] Kent includes some seriously deprived areas and should not be mocked.

I am told that universal credit is helping people to work more hours when they want to, empowering work coaches to help people, and helping claimants to gain independence. I will not pretend that it is perfect. I welcome the Government’s raising awareness of the advance payment and I am glad that there is flexibility for the housing component to go directly to the landlord where that is the right thing to do. That needs always to be possible when it is the right thing to do, but I am told that it is sometimes difficult to trigger. It is wrong when landlords discriminate against people on benefits; that should be tackled. All in all, however, universal credit is a better system, and I will be watching carefully to ensure it continues to help my constituents as it is rolled out fully in my area.

5.32 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Delay is not denial. We are asking that the roll-out of universal credit be paused and the system rectified before roll-out. If the roll-out is not paused and the policy continues as is, it will be less universal credit and more universal crisis. In its current state it is hurting, not working, as we have heard from Members on both sides of the House. My constituent Mr Bloy has explained to me that he is always on the back foot. Currently, he is in arrears on his electricity and gas bills, and in August he was sanctioned for allegedly missing an appointment in February, even though the DWP has acknowledged it sent the appointment letter to the wrong address, so he would not have known about it.

The roll-out needs to be paused until system defects and disproportionate impacts, such as those identified in the equalities impact assessment, can be identified and thoroughly fixed. To do the same thing and expect different results is nonsensical.

5.33 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I welcome the key feature of universal credit, which aims to ensure that work always pays. As we heard from my hon. Friend for Bolton West (Chris Green), training and opportunities continue to be limited by the existing system, so let us not pretend we started from a perfect place. I hear on the doorstep how people are infuriated by Labour’s failure to remedy the system. Universal credit is a difficult but needed revolutionary reform.

Universal credit services have been rolled out in my constituency since July, and I am pleased to say that I have not had a great number of concerns. None the less, my caseworkers have picked up on two issues, which I happily raise today. The first is internet access for those who are less technologically able. I would like the Minister to take that forward. Some people use internet cafés. Some use other people’s access to the internet so that those people can work with them through the process. It can be daunting, but they do it and stumble because they do not have the full paperwork. We need real clarity on what paperwork is required, and then people will feel less frightened and see it more as an opportunity.

On 20 July, I had a meeting with my local housing association, Radian, which has been successfully helping people to get into work and into training. Its positive involvement absolutely has to be encouraged. Eastleigh has moved on to a live service. Staff at Radian have confirmed that they are actively supporting tenants. This new approach to benefits is allowing it to offer a wide range of opportunities through its website and tenants’ magazines.

I do not want to scaremonger. MPs on neither side of the House have a monopoly on compassion. All of us can shape the future of universal credit and make it better, because it does work.

5.35 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): My constituency was an early roll-out area for universal credit and now has the full service, so through bitter experience and not through scaremongering, I will share some stories with hon. Members today.

Universal credit is having a detrimental impact on single-parent families. I have raised this previously on behalf of a constituent who is a single mother working hard to provide for her two children. As a result of the way that childcare costs are calculated within universal credit, she is in serious debt and may have to leave work. A policy that is designed to get people into work is, in its current form, keeping them out of it. Single-parent families need security and support, but under this new system they are facing unnecessary pressure, uncertainty and worry from a Government who seem to fail to understand those pressures. I understand the pressures that single-parent families face not only because I was raised by my mum on her own, but because I listen daily to experiences of my constituents, as well as the expert opinions of organisations that have been campaigning for the Government to halt and fix this roll-out.

Six weeks may be a short time in politics, but it is a very long time to wait for families who are already struggling. How can this be a successful system ready to be rolled out across the country when over half of those receiving it need to borrow money before their first payment?
[Danielle Rowley]

I thank Members of this House and campaigners for putting pressure on the Government to remove the cruel phone charges, but there is more that we can do. People are in debt, facing eviction, waiting six weeks for payments, and relying on food banks, and we can put an end to it today.

5.37 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): We somehow seem to have bred a society that is too often too reliant on benefits. It is right that as a Government we help to provide a pathway back into work. The children in some parts of my constituency have grown up knowing four generations of unemployed in the family. That is not right. We have to try to break that cycle and help people get back to work. We also have to allocate the funds so that they go to the people who really need it, at the same time making the spending of taxpayers’ money fair. That is what universal credit is all about.

As we have heard, there was a need to change the old, inflexible, multi-agency, over-complicated system. Replacing it with this new all-in-one system run by one point of contact has been praised by everybody I have spoken to in Taunton Deane, including the CAB. Indeed, Taunton Deane is one of the first rural areas to see the full roll-out, so it is very much being watched.

However, I want to raise with the Minister some of the challenges in rural areas. The reliance on online applications particularly affects the elderly. We have a very large elderly population in Somerset, and I ask that we make sure that we help them. Mobile coverage is often poor, as are broadband speeds. We still need to address that in some areas. Once we have aligned all those things—I know that this Government are committed to putting money into that—the whole system will join up and work successfully.

I want to see a whole new system so that children growing up in families where they have seen only unemployed people have a different attitude to life, and people do not think that benefits are there just to keep them unemployed—rather, they see that they are there to help those who need it, but what they really need to do is get a job, and then they will know there is a better life.

5.39 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Universal credit was introduced to Leigh in 2013 as part of the local authority pilot, and there are currently 1,800 recipients in the area. I was, therefore, shocked to hear the Prime Minister claim at the Dispatch Box last week that the flaws in the universal credit roll-out were just teething problems and that the Government have been taking their time to address them.

I can say with certainty that those problems are not teething issues, but fundamental flaws in the universal credit system. During the four years of the pilot, people have been left without payments and there have been issues with IT and information sharing. Those problems have left families with huge rent arrears as result of having money unfairly withheld. In the borough, 80% of universal credit recipients are in rent arrears, compared with 36% of those who are not in receipt of universal credit.

That is not scaremongering, and it cannot be ignored. The system is evidently flawed. Where does that leave constituents? They can turn either to the local authority, which is also facing relentless, crippling budget cuts, or to food banks. The Trussell Trust has found that the number of emergency food parcels provided has risen by 16% in areas of universal credit roll-out.

The situation has also pushed people towards reliance on their bank or credit union for loans. My local credit union has told me of the spike in refusals of loans, because of the roll-out and the financial difficulties that residents now face. When people without long-term financial stability have reached out to the credit union after falling into rent arrears, it has accredited one in 10 refusals. That is all down to this complex and unworkable system. On behalf of my constituents who have dealt with the effects of the roll-out, I urge the Government to pause.

5.41 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): We have heard many people talk in this debate about the work of Jobcentre Plus, and I begin by paying tribute to the brilliant workers whom we have all met in our local Jobcentre Plus offices. They go the extra mile every day to try to find work for our constituents, many of whom live in deprived conditions and have genuine challenges. In agricultural areas such as mine, many people have had to adapt, over many years, to casual labour and a rapidly changing working environment.

Universal credit is a crucial opportunity for the Government to encourage part of that adaptation. The local housing providers I have met have told me that, in due course and with appropriate assistance, it is to their advantage and that of the benefit claimant for the claimant to have control over their own money, to pay their own rent and to be able to use IT, which is now an absolutely crucial part of modern working life.

It is important to step back for one moment and realise why Members on both sides of the House agree on the principles of universal credit. For all the smoke and fury, even the Labour party is calling only for a pause in this reform, because all of us, on both sides of the House, know it is essential. If we do not persist with it, we will not deliver the essential savings and the benefits that are vital for our constituents.

Universal credit is a benefit programme that includes pauses to learn. It demonstrates, as we have seen today, that the Government have been listening. I call on Members from all parts of the House to calm down and realise that the principles are important and we should get there together.

5.44 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Secretary of State has recently received a letter from the leader of Slough Borough Council, Sohail Munawar, following the council’s motion calling for the full roll-out of universal credit to be paused. I am proud of the council for having passed that motion, because the concerns are real. The partial roll-out has already pushed many in Slough into rent arrears and spiralling debt, with many claimants being forced to borrow money while waiting for their first payment. I heard what the Secretary of State said, but I have to tell him that his figures simply do not reflect the reality faced by my
constituents. Figures for the substantial arrears of individual tenants provided by Slough Borough Council show the difficulties that have already been caused by a partial roll-out in the borough, but because of the two-minute time limit I cannot elaborate on that in detail.

Another point to note, as highlighted in a letter signed by more than 100 MPs, including me, is that the planned expansion from October to 55 further areas a month will flood the system with almost 500,000 applicants every month. I know the concerns of many of my constituents, including Lisa, who attended an advice surgery after receiving a final notice and threat of court summons for council tax. She had missed instalments while waiting for universal credit to be paid, and as a result, the whole year's balance became due in one go, making the situation even more difficult. Lisa's first payment of universal credit did not come in until almost seven weeks after the original date of claim, and even then the amount was wrong.

Many organisations, such as the Slough food bank and the Slough Salvation Army, do an incredible job, but they should not need to do so in one of the most advanced nations on earth. That is why universal credit needs to be paused and fixed.

5.46 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I have listened to this debate with an open mind, willing to criticise the Government if need be, especially if they were to fail my constituents on the Isle of Wight. However, the more I have listened, the more I believe that it is in our interests that universal credit should go ahead. I notice that the Opposition support that in principle.

Apart from the relentless negativity, there have been a couple of sensible suggestions. I echo what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said about domestic violence and split payments. Will the Minister look into that? We need to be aware of people who are in an especially vulnerable position. I will work with Wight Dash, our domestic abuse centre on the Island, which I visited very recently to understand its specific concerns.

More generally, there is potential for financial hardship during the six-week transition period. I understand the principle, but if people have no money, they have no money, regardless of whether or not the principle is a good one. I join the chorus of those asking the Minister to do all he can to make sure that people transferring on to universal credit throughout the UK, including on my Island, know that they can be paid money in advance, with emergency payments on the same day. Will he consider increasing the advance from a half to, let us say, three quarters so that the principle of the loan remains, but a little bit more money goes into gearing up the system for success?

I will do all I can to work with my local groups to make sure that we are ready. Some Islanders have been on universal credit since last year and some will not be affected until 2019, but a lot are coming on to the system in May and June. The most important thing we can do is to make sure we are ready for that, so that we get the maximum upside from universal credit and all the fantastic support work that goes on around it to enable people to take opportunities, but will the Minister work with me to make sure that we minimise any potential negative effects as well?

5.48 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I have been interested to hear the range of views discussed today. I am from one of the areas where universal credit will be rolled out in early December, much to the concern of local residents. It is difficult to imagine the stress and deep financial distress that many of the people on this benefit will face over Christmas because of the ill-considered timing. From my perspective, this is wholly unacceptable, but I believe it is only one of a number of deep flaws in this ill-thought-through policy.

As we have heard, the six-week payment delay is a severe flaw. It does not take account of the reality that many people, especially those on low incomes, not only budget on a bi-weekly basis, but are in some cases paid once every two weeks. In our area, Reading Borough Council and local charities will do their very best to help those affected, but they have already raised serious concerns about this delay.

I should point out that the country as a whole is experiencing a dramatic rise in rent arrears, as well as increased evictions. We have noticed that in our town, and it is the same in many others in the south-east, as my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) mentioned. That is because of the difficulty that people who receive the benefit experience in budgeting to cover their rent. It is also because landlords appear unwilling to house people on universal credit. I have been warned about that as an MP and previously as a local councillor, and I have heard worrying evidence of it from tenants and community groups.

Evidence also suggests a link between the six-week delay and the pressure on food banks. Food banks in areas of full universal credit roll-out have experienced a 17% average increase in referrals for emergency food—more than double the national average. Delays in receiving benefits and changes in benefits have become two of the three top reasons for referrals to food banks. Those issues, linked with the delay in payment, have contributed to an increase in loans being taken out to meet basic needs—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

5.50 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): In 2010, the coalition Government inherited a broken welfare system that was over-complicated and encouraged a lifestyle of benefit dependency, with more and more families on benefits for successive generations, particularly in constituencies such as mine, where people have felt abandoned for decades. Many families who wanted to work and do the right thing were worse off and discouraged from taking on more hours. Since 2010, unemployment in Mansfield has fallen by half, and more people are able to live independently. The principles behind universal credit are absolutely right and make sense of the legacy of over-complicated benefits. Even Opposition Members largely agree with those principles.

The system is obviously not perfect. That is why the roll-out has been slow and measured. At every opportunity, the Government have looked at the system again and made improvements. They have introduced advance payments, alternative and direct payments and are making the helpline free, among other measures.
We know that the system is still not perfect, and I have taken concerns to Ministers, including about the security of private sector rentals, which the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned. However, the difference between Government and Opposition Members is that we are committed to improving, adapting and fixing the problems as we go because universal credit has already helped people into work, and the new, reduced taper rate that rewards those who work more hours will put £700 million back into the pockets of hard-working families on low incomes by 2021. Opposition Members would abandon that support and settle for a chaotic system that prevents people from improving their circumstances through work.

I ask the Minister to continue to listen and learn from every stage of the roll-out. I hope that the Government will look closely at Crisis’s brilliant Help to Rent scheme, to support more people into secure tenancies and to reassure landlords, and consider including that in the Budget.

We have to move forward with universal credit. It is a huge project and the practicalities of rolling it out are far from easy. That is why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) said, pauses are already built into the system to allow us to learn and change. We cannot go back to Labour’s disastrous system, which held people down: we should take the opportunity to offer people more support.

5.52 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I am exceptionally worried about the impact of universal credit roll-out on my constituents following today’s debate. The fact that the Government continue to plough on with a failing initiative despite protests from some Conservative Members shows that they are driven more by political pride than considered policy.

As we have heard, Citizens Advice says that half the people it has helped with universal credit were forced to borrow money while waiting for their first payment. The Government may claim that their advance payment system stops people being affected by the six-week waits, but as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) said so eloquently, we must remember that advance payments are loans. Universal credit claimants will be expected to pay them back. Many people on universal credit already struggle with debt. To offer them a further loan is a completely inappropriate solution to the problem.

We know that single parents are among the hardest hit by waiting times for their universal credit payments. I know personally how hard it was to raise my children on my own while on benefits and what it is like to be in debt. I have lived with the reality of having to feed my children while knowing that any money coming in is already owed to someone else. What a shame that the system stops people being affected by the six-week waits, but as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) said so eloquently, we must remember that advance payments are loans. Universal credit claimants will be expected to pay them back. Many people on universal credit already struggle with debt. To offer them a further loan is a completely inappropriate solution to the problem.

5.56 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The principle of simplifying the social security system is a good one, but surely that should mean simplifying it for the people who depend on it, such as my constituent Mhairi, who made 26 entries in her journal without any response before we had to get involved as an MP’s office.

In 2013, Inverness was a pilot area for universal credit. We have a simple view. We thought we would see what the problems were and report them to the Government, who would look at them and fix them. What actually happened was a one-sided arrangement. We were telling them about the problems in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017. There were endless ministerial meetings, debates, questions and letters asking—begging—for them to sort out the shambles, but nothing was done.

For those who do not think that universal credit is affecting rent arrears, I should say that Highland Council went from tens of thousands of pounds to nearly £2 million in rent arrears. That was entirely down to universal credit. There have been rent arrears, short payments,
long delays, lost paperwork, evictions, crushed staff morale, and, until today, a premium rate for phone calls—I commend for my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for his work on that.

We have 200 cases. There has been humiliation, degradation, desperation. Thank goodness for the support of the citizens advice bureau, the Highland Council support team and the jobcentre staff themselves. We have had single mums going from Christmas through to April without payments and living on food vouchers. Cancer patients have had to go without payments, getting short payments when the time came.

The Prime Minister said that the Government were listening and acting. For four years, that has not been our experience. I lay down this challenge for anybody on the Government Benches: come to Inverness, come to speak to our users, come to our summit on universal credit and hear from the people. I dare them to do that: to listen to the people who are being affected.

5.58 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I welcome the acknowledgement of Opposition Members that they agree with the principles of this much-needed reform, which is changing a broken welfare system.

I am not standing up here pretending that everything is perfect. The system before was not perfect either. We are not blind to the stories of human suffering that we have heard this afternoon; they are profoundly devastating when we hear them. We all see those people in our daily lives and in our constituencies. That is why we are raising these issues with Ministers, and they are listening to us.

In my constituency, we are gearing up for roll-out very soon, and I am meeting those involved so that I can be there on the ground flagging up the support available to people when they most need it. Please let us remember that for every heartbreaking story we hear in this place, there are positive stories of people’s lives being changed by being able to get back into work and meet their aspirations of taking on more work without being penalised for it. [Interruption.] Opposition Members shake their heads, but I have spoken to such people, as have many other hon. Members. My colleagues and I reject the caricature of us as uncaring robots. It does not help the constructive work we can do when we work together in this place.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding us that we all agree that the principles of universal credit will deliver great benefits. Does she share my concern, however, that the Opposition want to delay the roll-out of a programme that has already taken nine years? How much longer do they want?

Rachel Maclean: As my hon. Friend says, the programme is being rolled out cautiously. We spend a lot of time in our areas working with constituents to make sure they are not negatively affected. It is our job to ensure they get the help they need. I cannot vote for the motion tonight because it targets the most vulnerable people aspiring to escape the cycle of poverty in which they are trapped by the existing broken system.

6.1 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): As universal credit is a single credit combining several benefits, the accuracy and timeliness of payments is even more crucial than for the legacy benefits. Benefit errors have been common for some time, as my constituent Veronica and many others know too well, and they can have disastrous consequences.

Even before universal credit, people needed help from a food bank mainly because of problems with the benefits system. Where families claimed multiple benefits, however, even when one was suspended, others usually kept being paid and the family often still had some income. There is no backstop to universal credit, however, meaning that a failure to receive a payment can leave a family and their landlord with absolutely nothing. Local welfare support schemes are extremely patchy, difficult to access and, in some areas, simply do not exist. Delivery continues to be less accurate than for legacy benefits, and the complexity of the benefit makes improvements difficult. I am concerned that the design of universal credit does not sufficiently take into account the lives, skills and resources of the least well off and, as a result will lead to greater debt, poverty and exclusion. It should be paused until these design and implementation flaws have been rectified.

6.3 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I will not vote for a pause in the roll-out of universal credit. I speak as a supporter of welfare reform, and as I speak I think of the 1,005 people in my constituency currently seeking employment. The roll-out of universal credit is well under way in Stirling, and I have been impressed by what I have seen of the way it prepares people for work or a return to the world of work. Welfare reform is never an easy process, but the way the Government have approached the introduction of universal credit is the right one to deal with a change of this magnitude.

I have found the response of Ministers to have been very positive. They have undoubtedly listened to my concerns; far from being uncaring, the Government have worked to create fast-tracked advances, for example, to ensure that money reaches those who need it fast. We must continue to work through the practical issues of implementation, and I know that Ministers are keen to.

I have corresponded with Ministers on the issues facing rural constituencies such as mine, including problems with inadequate broadband and a lack of mobile coverage. In fact, there is not even public transport in some cases. Those are real concerns for me. I am particularly concerned about claimants who have mental health issues, and who struggle with the complexities of the various aspects of any benefit programme. I am also concerned about the issue of digital literacy, which has already been raised by a number of Members. I hope that the Minister will address those issues when he winds up the debate.

Many of us would like further consideration to be given to the difference between fortnightly and monthly payments, and the need that some claimants may initially have for a transition period between the two. I should also like the Government to reflect on the six-week wait for first payments. That is a long time for people to wait when they are in need, and it should not be beyond our means to design a better system to shorten it.

As Members of Parliament, we have a responsibility to ensure that we help people, and welfare reform should not be used as a political football.
6.5 pm

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): I was going to talk about the real problems experienced in my constituency—initially with the live service, the comparatively straightforward bit. I was going to talk about the huge amount of help needed by people applying for universal credit. I was going to talk about the delays in payments, and the practical problems that that causes, and about the arrears that people on universal credit are experiencing: an average of £625, as against the general average of £121. I was going to talk about the evidence that private landlords are beginning to refuse tenancies to people on universal credit and about the fear that some children could go without free school meals while their parents wait for their claims to be assessed, which is a problem that we really need to look at.

But the House has heard about all that from everyone else, so instead I am going to talk about Gateshead Foodbank, which covers my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns). In 2016 it issued 4,861 food parcels to keep families going, largely owing to the roll-out of live universal credit—and that is before we see full service.

This is about people. It is about families and children who are building up debt and going without, choosing between heat and food and making other difficult choices, and experiencing all the frustration of dealing with the new system. I ask the Government to think again about pausing. We have talked about “test, learn and rectify”;

let us do that.

6.7 pm

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): In 2016-17, the United Kingdom spent approximately £218 billion on welfare. I fully appreciate that a significant amount of that will have been spent on benefits that are not covered by this policy, but a not insignificant amount will have been. That is why Governments seek reform in this area, and it is probably why, in 2003-04, the Labour party sought to reform welfare by introducing the working tax credit. That was clearly an unmitigated disaster at the time, which shows that there have been complexities under Governments of both parties. I understand from the Office for National Statistics that of the £13.5 billion that was paid out, £1.9 billion was an overpayment. Welfare reform is complicated, but it is important for us not to look to the Government to fix everything.

I chair the board of a housing association, whg in Walsall, which manages 20,000 houses across 18 different authorities. We are currently dealing with 327 live cases of people on universal credit, 83 of which were clear of rent arrears when they came to us. We fully understand the complexity of this problem. However, we are using this opportunity to work with our tenants to ensure that they have planned their budgets. We have also applied, jointly with Accord housing association, for £23 million to operate the Click Start programme so that we can help both the unemployed and the economically active with computer literacy.

I say this: do not just look to the Government to fix your problems. Housing associations across the country are doing fantastic work to help their tenants themselves.

6.9 pm

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): East Lothian was chosen as one of the universal credit pilot areas—a place where it could be tested, and where learning could take place and it could have been rectified. In the short time that I have, I shall draw attention to two reports that I know the Government have seen.

The first was commissioned between June and August 2017 by the revenues team of East Lothian Council. It ran an online survey regarding UC to find out how to improve its service. There was a huge number of responses, from people who were online and competent and able to engage digitally. The results shown in it therefore cover people who have not been trapped by entrance into UC. Some 81% confirmed that they got their payment between six and eight weeks after applying, and 19% waited longer. Some 47% said they did not feel supported by the DWP, and only 25% managed financially while waiting for their first payment. That means that 75% had some deductions from that payment. Their main concerns were paying bills, housing, and feeding the family—the very foundations of the hierarchy of needs—and after three months 46% said their financial position had not improved.

Reference has been made in this debate to the “Universal Credit in East Lothian: Impact on Client Income” document created by the citizens advice bureaux in East Lothian in Haddington and Musselburgh, and the figures that the improvement was 24p per week and the loss £48.26.

In conclusion, I shall read one email I received:

“It pains me to say but last week the stress of everything got too much and I attempted to take my own life. I don’t know what else I can do feeling like this and getting constantly fobbed off by the UC. My wife informed them of my attempt on the 11/10/17 and still haven’t heard anything.”

6.11 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Unemployment has fallen in my constituency from 5.2% in May 2010 to 2.2% in September 2017, and youth unemployment has also fallen. That is in part due to the work of this Government in strengthening the economy, but it is also due to the commitment of the many businesses and organisations that have taken on more people, to the work of our colleges, further education establishments and apprenticeship providers, and to the work of our jobcentres.

But of course some people are not in work and some are in work but also depend on benefits, and it is important that we have a welfare system that helps people into work and supports those who need help. It is also important, however, that the system is fair to those who pay for it, and the old system of benefits was not working; it was a system under which it was not worth working for more than 16 hours a week. That was not fair.

Universal credit makes more sense and is a much fairer system. It has yet to be rolled out, but I have already met our local jobcentre and seen the preparation work it is undertaking to get ready for that. Walsall Housing Group has also prepared some of its tenants in anticipation of the roll out of universal credit. We should not forget that there is a nine-year roll-out period from start to end for universal credit.
We must also remember that this is a steady roll-out, with learning and, where necessary, action. We have already seen today that the helpline issue has been addressed. This is the way forward—making careful progress and not losing sight of our ultimate goal.

6.13 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Of course the aims of universal credit are welcome, but the simple fact is that full service roll-out is not delivering them. Instead, in too many cases it is causing confusion, stress, financial crises, arrears and debt, and is threatening families with homelessness, including in Kirkintilloch in my constituency.

If the Government are serious about their original ambitions for the roll-out, which I think are shared across the House, they should pause and listen and reflect on the genuine concerns raised not just on the Opposition Benches, but by various organisations ranging from poverty campaigners to advice services, from Churches to housing associations, and from staff working in the system to those suffering under it.

These organisations and individuals are not scaremongers. They must be listened to, and almost overwhelmingly and universally they seek a pause. Let us not forget that the roll-out of full service universal credit has barely started. Already, we are hearing how disastrous and problematic it is proving, so the faster roll-out planned in the months ahead risks massive cuts to the work allowance and to revisit the idea that they actually are. They have always been available. They are just making it up? How dare this place test and learn to housing associations, and from staff working in the system to those suffering under it.

We need a pause, and during that pause we need to take this benefit right back to first principles so that it is meeting its original aim of reducing poverty, rather than pushing people into crisis. We need to reverse the cuts to the work allowance and to revisit the idea that six weeks is an appropriate waiting time. Otherwise, the Government will be rolling out all the problems that we have heard about today: increased rent arrears, increased Government will be rolling out all the problems that we have heard about today: increased rent arrears, increased

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Universal credit is clearly designed by people who lack knowledge and experience of poverty and of what it is like to be an unemployed worker, and who have no experience of the full impact that this policy will have on claimants. I am absolutely appalled by the apathy shown by those on the other side of the House towards stories of suffering. Why do they think there is such a level of feeling among advice and support agencies? Do they think those agencies are just making it up? How dare this place test and learn a policy on actual people, on actual citizens? They have tried once again to divide those looking for work and those in work, but the people out there will see through that.

I want to make one substantive point about this policy, and that is on advance payments—or loans, as they actually are. They have always been available. They were supposed to be available only for those at crisis point. Let me tell the House how much that amounts to for a single person under the age of 25: they get about £126 for six weeks, which equates to £21 a week or £3 a day. I challenge anyone in this place to try to survive on £3 a day—

Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: Absolutely not. I challenge anyone in this place to try to do that and not feel the sense of outrage that we do.

I could talk about in-work conditionality, which punished those on zero-hours contracts, and the wholly inappropriate roll-out of this system in North West Durham on 13 December, which caused misery across the festive period. All the inadequacies and difficulties I have outlined have simple solutions. There is no need for such a protracted assessment period and there should be a clear and flexible payment option. There should be a warmth about the Department for Work and Pensions, a comfort. People should not feel scared or worried in their dealings with the Department. It should offer hope, security and guidance for my constituents. All that is within the power of this Government. Please pause this roll-out.

6.17 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Universal credit is being rolled out in my constituency today. I used to chair a debt and welfare advice centre on my estate of Rose Hill. On that council estate, 50% of children are growing up in families living in poverty. Guess what? Many of those families are in work, so in-work poverty does exist in this country.

I have a strong interest in this issue, but little time to talk about it, so I will focus on two areas where the Government could, if they listened, change things right now. It would cost nothing and massively improve the situation facing many claimants.

First, around implied consent, I will talk directly to the Secretary of State now, if he does not mind, because he seemed to suggest earlier that he thought that advice agencies would be able to go to the local jobcentre on behalf of their clients to help them when making a claim. Actually, that is not the case, because the rules around implied consent have been changed with universal credit. Following the intervention by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), only MPs are deemed to have implied consent from the people they are representing if there is a problem with universal credit, not advice agencies. We do not often have a magic wand, but will the Secretary of State please wave his magic wand—tonight—and say that he is going to change that? Advice agencies, as he seems already to believe, need that implied consent to represent the people they are trying to help and to be able to get through to the DWP to assist those who are struggling with their universal credit applications. He can do that and he can do it now. Please will he do it?

Secondly, we have heard already about how there will be a landlord portal and, allegedly, information sharing with landlords. Why is there no information sharing with local authorities? They have been banned from getting that information about the composition of universal credit, so they cannot work out who needs to get council tax benefit or which families will be classified for the pupil premium. Again, why does the Secretary of State not just wave that magic wand and say he will...
enable local authorities to be trusted partners? He can do it tonight. Please do it tonight. Two changes—say that you are going to put them in place.

6.19 pm

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) spoke well at PMQs about the effect of universal credit in her constituency. Lincoln also has pockets of deprivation: some 13,000 people who work earn less than the living wage; one in four children live in poverty; one in 10 households are in fuel poverty; and 10 areas in Lincoln are in the top 10% of most deprived areas nationally. Universal credit was rolled out for single people in Lincoln at the end of November 2015, and the manager of the local food bank says that usage has already increased significantly as a direct result of universal credit and benefit sanctions. When universal credit is fully rolled out in March, I am concerned that people who are already suffering from the effects of the bedroom tax, benefit caps and the freezing of benefit rates will suffer even more.

Gingerbread, the CAB and Crisis—it is not just Opposition Members—all agree that simplifying benefits is a good idea, but universal credit is causing increases in poverty and homelessness. We have all received those briefings. Universal credit is this chaotic and divided Conservative Government’s initiative and it must be halted. It is a direct and deliberate attack on the poor and the vulnerable—[Interruption] Government Members can shake their heads, but it is true. The Prime Minister must see the unnecessary suffering that her chaotic and divided Government are causing. They must stop inflicting this suffering on the people of this country and consider the needs of the many, not just the few.

6.21 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): This has been an important and interesting debate on an important issue, and I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for bringing it to the House. I have been listening to speeches from both sides of the House for hours, and people from both sides have been constructive in their comments. Like many, I believe that universal credit could be a tremendous benefit—I supported it years ago—but unless the Government fix some remaining issues, it will fail.

First, I was disappointed that the then Chancellor took £3 billion from the universal credit budget shortly after the 2015 general election, meaning that work does not pay anymore. It may pay a tiny bit, but the original concept was that work really would pay. I urge the Secretary of State and the Government to put that money back into universal credit.

Secondly, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), a former Secretary of State, said that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported universal credit. I was a bit surprised by that, so I did a quick check. The JRF actually said that it would support universal credit if it was properly funded—I just mentioned the £3 billion—and if payment and waiting times were reduced, which is exactly what many people have been saying today.

I have one final point to make in the limited time available to me. We have been discussing housing associations and housing benefit, but it is the private rented sector where there will be a car crash unless payments are made directly to landlords. Owing to the nature of their business models, private sector landlords will not wait two, three or four months for their tenants’ money to be paid. I urge the Government to fix those issues.

6.23 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak on behalf of not only my constituency, but the United Kingdom. People are worried. They live in fear. They cannot build a brighter, better future. Most criminal of all, they feel that people are not listening. I have a simple message for the country tonight: this side of the table is listening. Labour is listening.

People do not choose to live on benefits. Millions of children across the United Kingdom are growing up in working poverty. Their parents go out to work, but they cannot afford the gas or electricity bills and the fridge lies empty. That is the country we have today. That is the country that the Government have given the workers. Workers need a decent salary, and I am here to get justice for workers.

On Monday, a children’s choir travelled down from my constituency—500 miles—to come to Parliament and to see the play “Wicked”. I said, “When are you meeting Theresa May?” [Laughter.] They did see the play, but they came to Parliament and this lovely choir sang their hearts out for us. However, the point is that they are tomorrow’s adults. They are disabled children, and they were brought down here by their families thanks to the good will of the community of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, which collected the money for them. Some of those children will not make adulthood. For some it was their first time here, and they will not be back. They are the people I fight for. Those children are tomorrow. Do not tell me that they all want to work, because universal credit is also about children and adults who cannot work because they are looking after children.

I am showing the red card. That is what this is about. Let us halt it. Let us stop it.

6.25 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, and I nearly fell off my chair this morning. Having secured the Adjournment debate on 21 June 2017 on call charges for phoning the DWP, I was delighted with today’s announcement. For it to work, and to ensure that people are not charged for phoning the DWP, will the Government take action against third-party providers that claim to advertise the DWP telephone number online while ramping up the charges to transfer the call? That is the last issue on telephone charges to be addressed, and I hope the Government do so.

Next month is the 75th anniversary of the publication of the Beveridge report, which surely tells us that we should be having a cross-party, cross-community discussion on how to ensure our citizens are not victims of economic destitution. I urge all Members, and those watching the debate, to read the evidence submitted to the Work and
Pensions Committee by dozens of organisations working on the frontline to pick up the pieces of the broken universal credit system.

I urge hon. Members to read the cases on the Committee’s website submitted by victims of this system. People have been left with huge rent arrears. Pregnant women are forced to live on child benefit and food banks. Claimants are forced to choose between food and heating. That should not be happening in a 21st-century world, and it certainly should not be happening 75 years after Beveridge’s report.

I support the motion.

6.27 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I reiterate that the Opposition support universal credit. What we do not support is its shambolic implementation, and it is deeply offensive when Conservative Members accuse us of negativity.

Does the Minister know what it is like to live in a home in which every single penny is taken up by providing the necessities of living? Does he know what it is like not to have enough to eat? Does he know what it is like to be cold at home? Does he know what it is like to see a parent anxiously dreading the fuel bill dropping through the letterbox or worrying how they will buy school shoes or a warm coat for their children? Well, I do.

I grew up in a single-parent family in which my mother tried desperately hard to keep a home for my brother and me. She always worked, and she did not drink or smoke. She was always embarrassed to claim benefits, but she had no choice but to claim financial support to supplement her wages. There were no spare pennies, and a week’s benefit was the difference between our having enough to eat or not. I know only too well how hard it has been for single parents in my constituency to face as much as two months of waiting for universal credit payments.

The Minister is proudly promoting a system that is causing widespread misery, a system of hardship that is punishing families who are doing their absolute best, a system that is pushing more children into poverty. If the Government are serious about giving all children opportunities and supporting all families, I urge them to listen and to support the motion tonight.

6.28 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Universal credit was rolled out in Bedford in May, and it is causing pain and suffering to many of my constituents who find themselves much worse off after being transferred on to the new system. We were told that under universal credit people would never be worse off in work, but in reality the opposite is true. The fastest growing category of people in poverty are those in work, and many people on UC are worse off.

Work does not pay under this Government. Work does not pay for my recently bereaved constituent who has lost her bereavement benefit and now has to look for her two children as a working mother with £300 less a month. Work does not pay for my constituent who is now £250 worse off after transferring to UC. Work does not pay according to local charities, which tell me that on a daily basis they are meeting people who are facing debt crises of one sort or another. This experience is forcing people—often working families—into desperation, real poverty and shame, but it is this Government who should be ashamed, for introducing this cruel, shambolic and failed reform.

6.30 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): According to the plans announced by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) in July 2010, just after that year’s general election, the roll-out of UC was due to be completed this month; October 2017 was when it was all going to be finished. Instead, as we have heard, only 8% of the roll-out has taken place. So it has been a little ironic to hear Ministers and former Ministers who have presided over such an extraordinarily delayed programme getting hot under the collar about the sensible and thoughtful proposal from my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) that this project should now be paused in order that the problems we have heard so much about in this debate can be fixed.

I want to touch on the emerging administrative problems with the way this benefit is being delivered, with reports from the Child Poverty Action Group about UC being underpaid because real-time information provided by HMRC about income is not always reliable or accurate. It has also reported on claimants being paid the wrong amount of UC for no apparent reason. In other words, there is growing evidence that the IT for delivering UC is not working as it should. The position was well summed up by the current Secretary of State’s former boss, George Osborne, in his Evening Standard editorial last Thursday, where he wrote of the “horrible history of procuring an IT system for the new universal credit”.

A sorry history indeed it has been. In particular, there is growing evidence that this RTI system is not doing what it is supposed to do. That was flatly denied by Ministers for months until it emerged last month in response to a freedom of information request: the existence of the late, missing and incorrect RTI project.

6.32 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I have to confess that I am one of the many who was impressed when I first heard about UC. Let me assure the hon. Members for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) that the principle of making benefits easier to claim and helping people back into work is one I still support. But I find that the reality—the operation of UC and all the evidence—creates a very different picture. We hear that, instead of it helping, as many as 1 million children could be pushed into poverty by 2020. That surely cannot be the legacy that my Conservative colleagues would want to leave for future generations. They surely cannot be content with what they are hearing in this Chamber from constituents and even their own Back Benchers: that families are facing rent arrears and the threat of losing their homes; that there is anxiety about missed payments; and that people are choosing between making those payments or feeding their families.

Citizens Advice Scotland has already seen more than 100,000 people, one in five of whom have waited more than six weeks for payments—and only 14 areas in Scotland have UC. We stand at an important crossroads: the Government have the opportunity to pause UC,
address its many flaws and say to those coping with the cruel reality of this botched benefit reform, “We hear you. We recognise the problem and we will fix it.” I appeal to my colleagues on the Government Benches to reject that approach. Simply to abstain or to forge ahead with this now universally discredited scheme would demonstrate beyond doubt the emptiness of Government claims that they are building a country for everyone.

6.34 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Time dictates that I should speak about one section of the community for whom universal credit will have a particularly devastating impact: the self-employed, and specifically actors and creatives.

Most entertainers are self-employed. It has been established by case law and accepted by HMRC that entertainers should usually be classed as self-employed for tax purposes, but universal credit penalises those deemed gainfully self-employed by averaging out their previous years’ income and in most cases treating claimants as earning 35 times the national minimum wage—the minimum income floor. They are treated as if they earn £1047.50 a month, regardless of whether or not they do.

It is clear from the figures that self-employed claimants are far worse off on UC than they were on legacy benefits, and even more worse off compared with other unemployed UC claimants. As UC payments include housing costs, unemployed creatives will be unable to pay their rent, risking homelessness.

Unlike other UC claimants, entertainers do not have a choice about whether they pursue self-employment; they must be registered as self-employed to work professionally. In April, the Work and Pensions Committee called for the solving of the problems with the practical operation of UC to be made an urgent priority and for improvements to be made to its sensitivity to the realities of self-employment. Until that is done, the minimum income floor should not apply to self-employed UC claimants.

I urge the Government to celebrate our brilliant creative industries while understanding that the ebb and flow of entertainment salaries should not throw people into poverty. They must not undermine access for the working-class entertainers who enrich the creative industries as a whole. Please, pause and fix.

6.36 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I shall focus on the problems with universal credit in Warrington South. As the Minister will know, Warrington is one of the pathfinder areas in the north-west in which universal credit was introduced in 2013. As such, we are already seeing the severe consequences of the Government’s mishandling of universal credit in our communities.

It is often the most vulnerable in society who are most affected by the failures of programmes such as universal credit; indeed, low-income individuals and families are among those who have been hit the hardest. The annual report from Warrington food bank highlighted that in 2016-17 the number of meals delivered increased by 13.9% on the previous year. Volunteers and trustees at the food bank found that the increase was directly linked to the full roll-out of universal credit in the town. Research found that 48% of the 56,000 meals given out by Warrington food bank went to individuals suffering because of benefit changes or delays, and more than 34% of those meals went to children.

The situation is unacceptable and unsustainable. Government failures are putting people at increased risk of eviction and visits from bailiffs. The help offered in the form of Government advances comes with repayment rates that are unaffordable to many. The stated aim of universal credit is to make work pay and thereby encourage individuals back into work. The Government should consider this: if people have nowhere to live and nothing to eat, how can we expect them to get a job? Universal credit is simply not fit for purpose and the Government must pause the full service roll-out.

6.38 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Although it is obvious that the issues with universal credit could be addressed swiftly—for example, by reducing the waiting time for first payments; by providing emergency advances, but not as loans; and by equalising the in-work support disparity between the current system and universal credit—I fear that the problems with the policy run much deeper.

In demanding that the Government address these select issues, we risk presenting them merely as bugs, but they are not bugs; they are built into the system.

Universal credit was designed to offer a distinctly Conservative solution to a distinctly Conservative analysis of Britain today. It will teach a claimant how to make the right spending decisions by forcing them into rent arrears. It will help someone to resolve the conflicts in their relationship by depositing the sum total of their benefits into their partner’s bank account. It will put a whole month’s rent, previously paid directly to the landlord, into the pocket of a parent who is struggling with debt and dependency.

When we hear from the frontline about the problems with universal credit—long payment delays, rent arrears, domestic abuse victims trapped, and the arbitrary sanction of payments—we must understand that they are no accident; they are about ideology. They are not bugs; they are features. That is why we need to pause and to fix the system of universal credit. We argue not with the principle of it, but with its entire implementation, which is broken.

6.39 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): This debate has been wide ranging, and we have heard Members from all parts of the House describe with real locus and urgency the unrolling fiasco that is universal credit under this Government.

Ninety Members put in to speak in this debate, reflecting the huge concerns across the House and in the country. Labour calls on the Government to pause the roll-out of universal credit and fix the problems that have been so clearly described today.

Universal credit was designed to simplify the benefit system and provide support for those on low pay and out of work. We in the Labour party supported those original aims, but, in fact, this new benefit is damaging the lives of many of the people it is supposed to support.
Ruth George: Does my hon. Friend agree that, when the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that a further 3 million working families will be made, on average, £2,500 a year worse off, universal credit is never going to work for working families?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a very strong point and I thank her for it.

Sir John Major recently called the roll-out of universal credit operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving. A former Government official, Dame Louise Casey, likened it to jumping off a cliff. Members are extremely concerned about what universal credit means for their constituents. Indeed, 12 Members from the Government Benches have written an open letter to the Secretary of State, calling on him to pause the roll-out, and their concern is widely shared around the House.

In response to concerns raised last week, we heard the Secretary of State reassure us that those who go on to universal credit are more likely to be working six months later than they would have been on legacy benefits, and that they are also more likely to be progressing in work. However, his statistics date from 2015 when universal credit claimants were, on the whole, single unemployed jobseekers, whereas the benefit is now being rolled out to people with much more complex circumstances. Furthermore, his statistics dated from before the cuts to work allowances were introduced in April 2016.

In response to concern from all parts of the House about what is happening now, the Secretary of State said that universal credit is about ensuring that our constituents are in a stronger financial position—

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): rose—

Margaret Greenwood: I cannot give way, as I must make progress.

The reality, according to the Trussell Trust, is that food bank referrals have increased by more than double the national average in areas in which the universal credit full service has been rolled out. The Peabody Trust says that the arrears rate for its tenants in receipt of universal credit is three times that for tenants unaffected by universal credit. Half of families in arrears under universal credit have said that their rent arrears started after they had made a claim.

The Secretary of State said that if tenants have a reasonable expectation of receiving housing costs as part of their universal credit payment, the landlord should not take action and the tenant should not face eviction. If only it were that simple. Research by the Residential Landlords Association published in August found that 29% of landlords had taken action to evict a tenant on housing benefit or universal credit in the past 12 months and that arrears were the main reason for doing so. It also found that two in three private landlords were more reluctant to rent to claimants of universal credit because of their concerns about arrears.

The Secretary of State presented advance payments as the answer to the problems of delays in universal credit, but advance payments amount to only 50% of two weeks’ payments of the claimant’s estimated universal credit. He wants to raise awareness of advance payments, but if half of the claimants are already taking advance payments even before he has started, people are clearly struggling to get through the waiting period.

Organisations such as Citizens Advice have been sceptical that advance payments are the solution because they see the reality of what it is like to cope with no income for the six weeks or more without savings. As Members of Parliament, we are here to serve the people who live in our constituencies. It is our job to take the Government to task when they get it wrong, and on universal credit, they have got it seriously wrong—wrong in the design and wrong in the delivery. Let us look at the design first.

The flaws in the design of universal credit are many. The infamous six-week wait is a built-in pathway to problem debt. Universal credit is meant to mirror the world of work, but waiting six weeks or more to be paid does not, especially where people are used to being paid weekly or fortnightly by an employer. When I asked DWP what percentage of UC claimants receiving in-work support are paid monthly, the answer I received was:

“We do not have quality assured data on the payment cycles of universal credit claimants who are in work or for those who were in work before they claimed.”

Then there is the payment of the housing element directly to the claimant, not the landlord, putting vulnerable universal credit claimants who are in work or for those who were in work before they claimed.

The difficulty in arranging alternative payments has also been described. The two-child limit means that a new baby in a family that already has two children will not have the same social security support as their brothers or sisters because the family will not qualify for tax credits or universal credit for that child, with the unacceptable implication that some children are valued more than others. There is the minimum income floor for the self-employed, who the Government assume, for the purposes of universal credit, earn the equivalent of 35 hours a week on the national living wage after a year, even though around half of self-employed people earn less than two thirds of median weekly earnings.

The cuts to work allowances will leave some families up to £2,100 a year worse off even after the changes to the taper rate announced last year. The failure to provide work allowances for second earners brings into question the effectiveness of work incentives under universal credit, particularly given the importance of a second earner to address in-work poverty. The withdrawal of the two-child premium in universal credit means that some disabled people can be up to £62 a week worse off if they move on to universal credit because of changes in their circumstances such as moving from a live to a full service area or claiming another benefit such as PIP.

Paying universal credit to only one person in the household is a risky experiment, with scant regard as to what that might mean to victims of domestic violence and their children. There is an insistence that claims in the full service should be made and managed online, despite the fact that the most recent Government figures—from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in 2011—show that 5 million people in the UK lack basic literacy skills, 8 million lack basic numeracy skills and nearly 5 million had below entry-level IT skills. Many people on low income cannot afford internet access, or face increased difficulty accessing it because of the closure of libraries and jobcentres over the course of seven years of Conservative austerity. In any case, public libraries are not always the most appropriate places to fill in forms with personal information. We are all aware that broadband access can be even poorer in rural areas.
The list of design flaws is a long one. Then, of course, there are the failures in the implementation of universal credit under this Government. Not only have the Government designed a policy with the six-week delay built into the system, pushing many claimants into debt, but the Government are failing in the delivery too. The Secretary of State boasts that 80% of new claimants are paid on time, but this is hardly something to boast about. By this reckoning, we can expect that 80,000 people will have to wait longer than six weeks to receive their money over the next six months, and 40,000 will have to wait longer than 10 weeks. Surely the Secretary of State does not find that acceptable.

There is a crisis of problem debt, with 8.3 million people in the UK struggling with debt and £200 billion of unsecured consumer credit debts. On Monday, the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority warned that increasing numbers of young people are having to borrow to cover basic living costs. One of the most basic living costs of all is housing. Yet, young people aged 18 to 21 do not qualify for any help with housing costs in universal credit full service areas unless there are special circumstances. We now have a complicated patchwork of social security, where people with the same circumstances may have very different entitlement to social security depending on whether they are on legacy benefits or universal credit, and whether they live in a live or a full service area. Even DWP staff often find it difficult to know which benefit people should be claiming.

Despite all those issues, the Government have decided to accelerate the roll-out of universal credit to 50 jobcentres a month, at the same time as closing one in 10 jobcentres across the UK and a number of back offices. There are real question marks over whether the Department has the resources to deliver its universal credit programme, especially in the light of the 800 redundancies it has announced. Other problems include the online system struggling to accept evidence of people’s identity and childcare receipts when they are not on headed note paper. Citizens Advice highlighted the case of a mother who lost her job because she had to stay at home and look after her children when her universal credit was not paid in time.

The Government tell us they have a policy of test and learn when it comes to universal credit. Well, it is certainly testing people who have to wait weeks on end to receive their money. The testing is on real people and the consequences can be devastating, yet we see little evidence of learning—but there is still time and I urge the Secretary of State to learn, because the human cost of failing to take action would be great.

Universal credit was intended to be simpler, but we now have an incredibly complicated system where the nature of someone’s entitlement to social security has become a postcode lottery. It is vital that in the future we have a social security system that is robust enough to serve us well in the face of all the challenges before us, including the current insecurity of the labour market, the changing shape of families and the many challenges automation will bring as we move into the fourth industrial revolution.

6.50 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We have had a very good debate this afternoon, with fully 75 speeches—passionate, thoughtful and insightful—from Members on both sides of the House. I regret that in the time available I simply cannot respond to all the points made. I will cover as much of the material as possible, but I ask for colleagues’ forbearance in terms of interventions.

The debate may end at 7 pm today, but the discussions will go on. We recognise that some colleagues may have concerns outstanding, especially about vulnerable constituents when they first apply to universal credit. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will continue to work actively with colleagues to address those concerns and to ensure that, if changes need to be made, they are delivered.

Frank Field: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: I am terribly sorry, particularly to the right hon. Gentleman of all people, but I have less than nine minutes—

Frank Field: It is on a question I asked earlier.

Damian Hinds: Okay.

Frank Field: I posed the question twice to the Secretary of State. Our local food bank in Birkenhead says that from Christmas onward, it will need 15 tonnes more food because of the roll-out of universal credit. Should local people believe the food bank or the undertaking the Secretary of State gave that it will all be hunky-dory and those are scare tactics?

Damian Hinds: Of course I gave way to the right hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee. To respond to his question, of course we do not expect that to happen. What universal credit does is make it more straightforward for people to go into work at all times of the year. Fundamentally, we are not looking at a great acceleration in the roll-out. I will be happy to follow up with him after the debate. We will provide further progress updates in the weeks ahead and I look forward to active dialogue with colleagues.

Our current system is at once too complex and too uniform. It holds people back because of the perceived risk of ending a benefit claim to go into work, and it is not always obvious how much better off they will be. All too often, once they are in work people are caught by the hours rules in tax credits. I think we have all met people in our surgeries who are stuck on 16 hours a week when they want to be able to get on, progress in their career and provide more for their family. That was illustrated well by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall).

Those and similar features have been endemic in our system for decades, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and Lord Freud for their insight and determination not merely to regret those things but to reform them; not just to criticise the system but to change it. My hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) put it well when he said that it was not so much that the old system was designed badly, but that as a whole the old system was not designed at all.
The new system, universal credit, simplifies by merging six benefits into one and asking people to deal with only one part of Government, not three. The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), for Angus (Kirstene Hair), for Southport (Damien Moore), for Angus (Kirstene Hair), for Southport (Damien Moore), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). We all care passionately about these subjects. Although it is very welcome that child poverty has come down, there is more to do. We know that work is key. There are 608,000 fewer children in working households since 2010, but universal credit will help further.

The question of universal support came up, including from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. I commit to him that we absolutely continue to focus on that and see the absolute value of it. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) reminded us of the valuable role that can be played by partners, including housing associations.

The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) questioned whether we were cutting staff. We are not cutting staff—we are increasing our staffing numbers in parallel with universal credit roll-out. I would like to follow up the specific case she mentioned with her separately, if that is all right. I will also perhaps speak separately about it to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield).

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) talked about emergency temporary accommodation. He has been very assiduous on these matters. We have listened to concerns on this, and we are looking closely at it. We will work with the sector to find a solution. We are also looking at the APA—alternative payment arrangement—process in the private rented sector in order to improve it, and we continue to look at the issues around housing benefit debt recovery.

IT access and capability was rightly mentioned by several Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). Digital skills are very important. That is why we have the extra support and help in jobcentres, with PCs there. My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) pointed out that those IT skills are also incredibly important these days in applying for jobs and when in work.

The hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) asked about childcare. I can confirm that within universal credit the maximum reimbursable amount rises from 70% to 85%, and that is on top of the doubling of free provision for three-year-olds and four-year-olds. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) asked about premium phone numbers. I share his abhorrence of companies who do this—third parties who pretend to be something they are not. I will work with him to try to find a solution. It is not absolutely clear that anything illegal is going on, but I agree that we must try to find a way to address it.

Many hon. Members made passionate speeches about social justice and child poverty. We heard excellent speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), for Angus (Kirstene Hair), for Southport (Damien Moore), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). We all care passionately about these subjects. Although it is very welcome that child poverty has come down, there is more to do. We know that work is key. There are 608,000 fewer children in working households since 2010, but universal credit will help further.

Yes, this is a fundamental—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36.)
**Question put forthwith.** That the Question be now put.

**Question agreed to.**

**Main Question accordingly put.**

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 299, Noes 0, 18 OCTOBER 2017

Division No. 24 [6.59 pm]

AYES

Abbot, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amess, Mike
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brady, Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffee, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyne, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella

Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, rh Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hoyle, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hug, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Levell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mailhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John

McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Perry, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, rh Mr Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Debbie Abrahams: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a major defeat for the Government on their flagship social security programme. Conservative Whips and the Prime Minister have spent the day arm-twisting Conservative MPs to vote against a pause in the roll-out of universal credit, while the Secretary of State has treated on various aspects of his universal credit policy in a panicked attempt to appease Tory MPs who know that the policy is not fit for purpose.

Yet again, the Prime Minister and the Tories cannot command a majority in the House of Commons. The Prime Minister is in office but not in power. Mr Speaker, have you had an indication from the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State that they intend to come to the House and clarify how they will ensure that the Government implement the clearly expressed will of the House to pause the roll-out of universal credit?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that I have received no indication as yet that any Minister intends to come to the House to make a statement on that matter, although it is of course open to colleagues to request such.

I should say the following in these relatively unusual—not unprecedented, but relatively unusual—circumstances. There is nothing disorderly about a recorded vote of the House in which there are no Members recorded as voting no. Members who shout “No” when the question is first put must not vote aye, but they are not and cannot be obliged to vote no. As Standing Order No. 39 states:

“A Member is not obliged to vote.”

A Division requires two Tellers on either side and that was the case.

I should add as follows. A resolution of the House of Commons is just that: an expression of the view of the nation’s elected representatives in the House of Commons. This is important and Members need to hear this part of what I have to say. Constitutionally, from my own experience but based also on procedural advice, and as clearly as what I said a few moments ago, the House cannot direct Ministers. It is for Ministers in the Government to decide how to respond to the clearly expressed view of the House. I feel confident that they will do so, bearing in mind the mood of the House expressed in the urgent debate, which I allowed just two weeks ago, on the need for Government respect for the proceedings of the House.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. Mr Speaker. Just a slight correction, of course: the Government did not vote against the motion and so could not possibly have lost it. It might be that the Labour deputy Chief Whip will have to be sacked for rebelling against the Labour party line. On a serious point, Sir, would you agree that it would be helpful if there was a convention in the House that where a substantive motion is passed the Government should come to the House, within a reasonable time, and make a statement about what they intend to do about it?

Mr Speaker: We will come to the hon. Gentleman. I am saving him up; I would not want to waste him.

What I said was correct. This was the expressed will of the House. If people choose not to take part in a Division, they cannot suddenly say, “Well, we didn’t lose”. We are elected to come to this place to debate and decide what our position is on motions. If people choose not to vote, that is perfectly in order, as I have explained, but the motion was carried. That is not an expression of opinion on my part. It is not an indication of bias, a display of partisanship, a siding with one party or another; it is a statement of fact. The motion was passed. End of subject.

Secondly, I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman, who has been utterly consistent with what he said the other day. I think it highly desirable that the Government, in the light of the result, should come to the House and show respect for the institution by indicating what they intend to do. It may be that a Minister would wish to do that or the Leader of the House. As we all know in this place, the Leader of the House is not merely the Government’s representative in the House; the Leader of the House has to be the House’s representative in the Government. What I have said is extremely clear, and we will await events patiently, as always.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. My response is twofold. First, I do not cavil—I have known him a long time—but I have not been corrected. I have been corrected many times in my life—I make no complaint about that—but I require no correction on this occasion. [Interruption.] Oh, there is a suggestion that somebody else was being corrected. Well, I will not get into that nether region.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: We will come to the hon. Gentleman. I am saving him up; I would not want to waste him.

What I said was correct. This was the expressed will of the House. If people choose not to take part in a Division, they cannot suddenly say, “Well, we didn’t lose”. We are elected to come to this place to debate and decide what our position is on motions. If people choose not to vote, that is perfectly in order, as I have explained, but the motion was carried. That is not an expression of opinion on my part. It is not an indication of bias, a display of partisanship, a siding with one party or another; it is a statement of fact. The motion was passed. End of subject.
disrepute. A Minister is not going to come to the House to explain why they did not turn up to vote, but what can you do to help the House compel the Leader of the House to come to the House and make a statement about the Government’s behaviour and refusal to participate in the democratic arrangements of the House?

Mr Speaker: I must be absolutely explicit in response to the hon. Gentleman, for his benefit and that of the House, and the short answer is that it is not within the powers of the Speaker to compel a Minister, including the Leader of the House, to do anything in this situation. We very much depend in this House, this institution, this great place, on conventions, precedent and a sense of respect for the will of the House. He is a very experienced Member of this place and will know that mechanisms are available to him and others, on both sides of the House, to try to secure a governmental response, if they wish. If they do, they will certainly not find the Speaker an obstacle to their endeavours.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not quite understand something. For 34 years, I have been troopng through hundreds of Divisions on Wednesdays under successive Labour and Conservative Governments. When I was required to be here for those Divisions, I was under the impression that it served some purpose. What worries me is that surely there is some precedent here. You mentioned precedent a moment ago, Mr Speaker. This is not, and should not be, a university debating society. What is the point of the House of Commons if we just express opinions for the sake of it? Surely, when we vote, it should have some effect. I hope that you will use your influence, through the usual channels, to ensure that the House of Commons is at the centre of our national life.

Mr Speaker: I absolutely respect what the hon. Gentleman has said. There have been occasions on which, for example, Opposition day debates have expressed a view different from that of the Government. I think there was a case some years ago, when the hon. Gentleman’s party was in opposition, in which that party was successful in a motion that it brought to the House, and the policy of the Government changed thereafter; but it is not for me to say that that has to happen. I have tried to tread a delicate path on this matter, and to explain factually to the House what the result of the vote does signify, but equally, in response to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), what it does not automatically signify.

I must say to the hon. Gentleman that it is not for me to seek to compel. What I will say to occupants of the Treasury Bench is that it is blindingly obvious that this is an unusual situation about which there is strong opinion, and I think it would be respectful to the House if a Minister, sooner rather than later, were to come to the House and insist, and no little eloquence, his opinion; however, there is not an automatic link between the two phenomena that he has described. There could be such a link, but it is not automatic. The hon. Gentleman’s mind has raced ahead.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am saving the right hon. Gentleman until last, because he is so senior.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It deals with the matter of precedent. I am sure you will agree that, historically, there have been plenty of occasions on which the Opposition have been led by institutional thinking, whereas the Government have decided that they are running scared of every vote that we put to them—should we not be revisiting the decision made only a couple of weeks ago about the composition of Standing Committees?

Mr Speaker: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. I hope he will not take offence, but if he does, it is just too bad—[Laughter]—when I say that he has expressed, with his characteristic force and insistence, and no little eloquence, his opinion; however, there is not an automatic link between the two phenomena that he has described. There could be such a link, but it is not automatic. The hon. Gentleman’s mind has raced ahead.

Mr Speaker: What I will say to the hon. Gentleman is twofold. First, I think it better not to entertain hypothetical questions, or, at any rate, not at this time. Secondly—and I say this with some feeling to the hon. Gentleman, who should know from his own experience the truth of what I say—cleverness can be effective in this place, but it is not invariably so.

Chris Bryant: As you know! [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: I was rather minded to say that I would not know, but the hon. Gentleman would. I think we will leave it there for now.

There is also a difference between a motion that binds and a motion that does not. Whether the hon. Gentleman thinks the motion is clever or not, some motions instruct, and can therefore secure an outcome, and others do not. The hon. Gentleman will probably be aware not only of the distinction abstractly, but of what types of motion instruct and what types do not. These matters can be consulted on among colleagues and with professional advisers, but I think I should leave what I have said for now.
Mr Howarth: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You have been admirably clear about the obligation that rests with the Government to address the situation they now find themselves in. Even if that is not cutting a Minister’s salary for not responding, should there not be in our Standing Orders some provision whereby there can be a penalty for simply refusing to respond to the will of this House?

Mr Speaker: It is open to the House to look at its Standing Orders, and potentially to revise them, at any time; that is not for the Chair. I completely understand the sentiment the right hon. Gentleman has expressed, but I leave that to colleagues. I have tried to be absolutely fair on this matter: this motion does matter; it is important; it was passed. As a matter of fact, however, it is not binding. That is the situation.

I simply say to those who are concerned about a statement that there may be a statement tomorrow, and there are means by which people who want to procure a statement can seek to do so if none is proffered. That is just a statement of the facts. The Chair is not seeking to deliver any change tonight or make any commitment. It is not for me to do that. It is for sensible parliamentarians to talk to each other, to reflect on what has happened, to have a regard to the reputation of the institution, and to act accordingly. People are perfectly capable of understanding the significance of what I have said and of deciding, individually or collectively, how to respond, possibly as early as tomorrow.

PETITION

Superfast Broadband for Wellpond Green and Westland Green in Hertfordshire

7.32 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): This is a petition of residents of Wellpond Green and Westland Green in my constituency, and it contains the signatures of Dr Amanda Halliday and a total of 155 residents of those two villages. In fact, all the residents have signed, and they are aggrieved that undertakings to give superfast broadband access by March of this year were not kept, that they had given up the chance of going with another supplier on the basis of those undertakings, and that now they have been told they have to wait until 2019.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Wellpond Green and Westland Green in Hertfordshire.

Declares that the villages were added to the Connected Counties/BT Openreach programme for superfast broadband for implementation by March 2017; further that many residents discontinued negotiations with an alternative supplier offering the same timetable; and further that Connected Counties then re-modelled the programme so that residents would not be connected until 2019 causing great inconvenience.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government and BDUK to facilitate immediate connection of superfast broadband.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002065]

Animals in Peril

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

7.34 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): In September, I read an article in the New Statesman entitled “We Are Heading Towards a World Without Animals”. It was a shocking title for an article perhaps, but one that presents a truly horrific prospect for our world. Perhaps we need to be shocked—shocked into taking deadly seriously what must surely be one of the most profound issues our world faces today.

This powerful article, written by Simon Barnes, considered some of the most deeply concerning statistics, which highlighted the plight of some of our planet’s most gravely endangered species. The article quotes the Living Planet Index, compiled by the Zoological Society of London and the WWF, and warns of a dramatic decline in wild animals by 2020, with 13,000 of the 65,000 species listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as being under threat, with 3,000 of those being critically endangered.

For example, African grey parrots have declined in numbers by up to 79% in the past 47 years, lions by 43% in 21 years and giraffes by 40% in 30 years. Possibly the worst of all is the decrease in the number of black rhinos—95% in the past 50 years. Primates are also drastically falling in numbers: a study published in the journal Science Advances revealed that 60% are threatened with extinction, including gorillas and chimpanzees. In the British Isles, we are by no means immune from the decrease in native species, with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reporting the hen harrier being close to extinction in the UK, the turtle dove declining by 93% since the ’70s and the skylark having a population 10% of what it was 30 years ago.

We have also lost 8% of our butterfly species and 3% of the beetle population, and hedgehogs are in huge decline too, with their numbers plummeting to around 1 million, compared to 36 million in the ’50s. As we all know, the red squirrel population continues to dwindle. I could go on.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing this Adjournment debate and congratulate him on the hard work that he does on all these issues. May I say this to him very gently? Does he not agree that there is an onus on each of us not simply to refrain from harming animals, but to play our part in securing a better environment and habitat for animals? Will he join me in recognising the wonderful conservation work that is done in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland by the wildfowling clubs and, indeed, the country sports sector as a whole?

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and agree entirely with his comments.

The author of the article does not pull his punches, stating that our planet is going through a significant change, that we are witnessing “right now” the process of widespread extinction and that humans “seem to have accepted the idea that the loss of wild animals is the sad but acceptable price of progress...The loss of animal species is not seen as a serious matter—when did you last hear a politician talk about the extinction crisis?”
Well, tonight we are proving that assumption to be wrong: in this House of Commons and across the world, we must speak up about this crisis and do so with clarity, ever more loudly and with increasing frequency.

Keynote statistics about marine wildlife are also extremely alarming. The acidity and temperature of the seas are rising, and according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation’s 2016 report, “The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture”, 90% of fish stocks across the world are fully exploited, over-exploited or in crisis. With the global human population increasing and the demand for all natural resources sky rocketing, scientists are understandably pessimistic about the future. Rationalising why these significant and deplorable animal population decreases have happened, and how to stop them decreasing further, is now a vital matter that we simply have to address. If we do not, we may suddenly find ourselves in a world with little or no large mammalian wildlife and a fundamentally disturbed nature across land, sea and air. What an empty world that would be. None of us could feel pride in handing it to future generations.

It is important to note that the animals in peril across the world are not just the large, iconic creatures we all love so much. Indeed, the vast majority are not. We all need to study the work of ZSL’s “EDGE of Existence” programme, which prioritises species that are both evolutionarily distinct and globally endangered according to the red list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature. An example is the Attenborough’s long-beaked echidna. Named in honour of Sir David Attenborough, it was previously believed to be extinct. The EDGE programme uses a scientific approach to allocate limited funding most effectively to unique and special animals that could otherwise be so easily forgotten. If such species are lost, there will be nothing else like them on earth. I hope that the Minister with reassure the House that Her Majesty’s Government regularly consult organisations such as ZSL and IUCN for their expertise and input on environmental policy on worldwide ecosystems.

During my time as an MP, as shadow Animal Welfare Minister between 2007 and 2010, and as chairman of the zoos and aquariums all-party parliamentary group since 2010, I have been privileged to work with many wildlife, conservation and animal welfare organisations, especially the ZSL and the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and many esteemed environmental organisations devoted to protecting wildlife in all forms. Today, sadly, there is much pessimism about the future. The message from organisations such as the UN, the World Wide Fund for Nature, BIAZA, Fauna & Flora International and many others is clear: we are running out of time and more needs to be done—much more.

The scientific consensus for that point of view is global and extensive. Oregon State University’s “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: a second notice” article argues that humanity needs to be environmentally sustainable, and it has been signed by more than 13,000 scientists from across the world. How many scientists need to speak out before Governments, politicians and people from across the world realise that it is in mankind’s vital interests to ensure that our way of life is sustainable both now and in the future? The time to act is not next year or after the next election or at some point in the future; the time to act is now. For example, we are all aware of the dire threat to the bee population caused by some insecticides. Is it not obvious that we should be acting pre-emptively both on climate change and when the existence of vital ecosystems are threatened, rather than waiting for a real crisis point or, worse, for when it is too late?

Before I talk about the areas where I believe Her Majesty’s Government must do more, I want to mention the recently announced plans to ban the ivory trade in the UK. This ban is of course right, but it is long overdue. I commend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for taking the lead on the issue at long last and acting to halt the decline in the world’s elephant population. However, I fear that it may be seen in future years as too little, too late. The UK has been too slow to realise the enormous implications of the global ivory trade on the populations of large mammalian life, with the saddest statistics of all showing the ongoing collapse of the elephant population.

Around three quarters of a million African and Asian elephants exist in the wild today, but that number has fallen by 144,000 in the past seven years alone. I repeat: 144,000 in seven years. That rapid and seemingly out-of-control collapse is overwhelmingly due to the barbaric practice of poaching. Those numbers are astonishing and, on the face of it, show why the UK Government have done the right thing. However, why did we not act earlier? Of course we cannot turn the clock back, but we can learn from our mistakes and work to prevent a similar lack of foresight in future.

We must act faster to protect and save our wildlife by working with international organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, to do everything possible to crush poachers, to promote job creation in environmental conservation efforts across the world and, most importantly, to strive to rebalance our relationship with the natural world.

In what has become an increasingly unstable world, I have no doubt that the United Kingdom will continue to play its full part in working with our allies on maintaining geopolitical stability and preventing humanitarian crises, but, as our world becomes more complicated and harder to govern, my fear is that nature suffers, often taking a lower priority.

Twenty years from now, what will we say if some of the world’s most iconic animals exist only in zoos and ecosystems across the world have collapsed or are on the verge of collapsing? How will we explain that to future generations?

We must surely make protecting our environment a key priority and a major destination of our resources. Our political system is designed to introduce, debate and pass legislation incrementally, and in this complicated age of domestic and international politics it is straining to find the time and energy to devote to such a big problem. With animal populations decreasing at such a dramatic rate, and with the global human population increasing by 83 million a year, we may need to be more radical in our approach.

I call upon Her Majesty’s Government to do the following. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs needs greater resources to place more people on the ground to protect animals and plants in peril across the world. The Department for International
Development should also re-evaluate how it allocates money and consider how it might provide more help for anti-poaching efforts and environmental conservation.

The Government should also allocate more time in both the House of Commons and in the other place for debating environmental issues. Given the significance of some of the challenges we are discussing, using more of our time on this matter would not only be appropriate but would gain widespread public approval.

The Government also need to make greater commitments to international conventions and agreements and push for further-reaching targets, especially as we leave the European Union. For instance, will the Government commit to replacing the biodiversity strategy, adopted by the European Union in 2011, with an equal or greater British strategy? The United Kingdom has led the world on these issues in the past, and I have no doubt that the Minister will agree that Britain can and must do so again.

Additionally, the Government need to continue to commit to the UN’s sustainable development goals. Although those goals do not necessarily focus on the protection of wildlife alone, it is beyond question that to ensure wildlife is protected and sustainable, both in the UK and worldwide, we need to counter issues such as poverty, health, education and sustainable cities. On the last of those issues, it is important that in the UK we ensure our cities can be a home for wildlife. We can help people and nature by improving air and river quality, and by expanding the size and improving the health of green spaces in every urban area. In short, we must ensure that future legislation uses every opportunity to promote conservation.

Finally, we must use our international influence to help, persuade and, if necessary, press Governments across the world to be more environmentally sustainable, which I consider to be an appropriate use of British influence and power. We must lead the world by example, educate and persuade, and we must never give in.

I draw my speech to a close by reflecting on the good that can be done when animals and plants in peril are identified and helped. There are teams of scientists, conservationists, zoologists and environmentalists across the world, many underpaid or just volunteers, who are dedicating their lives to helping the environment in all ways. It is right that we in the House pay tribute to what they have done and continue to do in working so hard to study these issues, often with their feet on the ground, to protect and guard our wildlife and natural environment.

Many such examples, I am proud to say, are some of the excellent conservation projects on and around our overseas territories. The UK and its overseas territories combined represent the fifth largest marine estate in the world, and have been at the vanguard of global efforts to increase ocean protection through the blue belt policy to create the largest marine sanctuaries anywhere on the planet. The UK is custodian to a third of the world’s albatrosses, the world’s largest coral atoll and, believe it or not, perhaps more than a quarter of the global population of penguins; 2018 represents the first milestone for the blue belt, with the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands conducting a review of the sustainable-use marine protected area, encompassing more than 1 million sq km of its exclusive economic zone. The Great British oceans coalition, comprised of the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Greenpeace, BLUE, the Marine Conservation Society and the ZSL, is calling for the reclassification of the South Sandwich Islands as a fully protected reserve, highlighting that by safeguarding more than 500,000 sq km of pristine sub-Antarctic habitat, the UK can reaffirm its standing as a global leader by becoming the only nation in the world to create fully protected marine areas in the Indian, Pacific, Atlantic and Southern oceans.

When I learn of such fantastic and ambitious work being conducted in all corners of the planet, with Britain taking the lead, I am reassured. However, it cannot be business as usual. Although we are trying so hard to reverse and heal the damage caused to animal populations and wildlife across the world, it is pointless if we do not stop the cause of the problem. We need to engage ourselves in an enormous effort to guarantee the future of the wild, and the many animals and plants in peril, so that our successors can enjoy the knowledge of there being a wild beyond our shores, within these islands and on our very doorstep, and not find themselves in a world without animals.

In short, we as a civilisation, have to face up to one of the biggest challenges we will ever encounter: rebalancing how we fit within the natural world. As the great pioneer of conservation and founder of Jersey Zoo, Gerald Durrell, stated a generation ago:

“People think that I am just trying to look after nice, fluffy animals. What I am really trying to do is to stop the human race from committing suicide.”

7.54 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): That was an extraordinarily powerful and deeply troubling speech, and I agree with every word that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) spoke, but I want to add a little bit of good news and I am going to use the 30 or 40 seconds I have available to do so.

This very morning, four gorillas born and bred in Kent landed in the Congo, where they are due to be released by the Aspinall Foundation and will live the rest of their lives free. There are now 60 gorillas that have been released by that organisation, and those gorillas have bred 30 babies, which means that there are 90 gorillas that would not be there were it not for the work of that organisation. It is the only organisation in the world even attempting to rehabilitate—to reintroduce—gorillas, and we are talking not just about gorillas, but about 10 black rhino, 100 primates, 15 European bison, hyenas and much more besides. All I would say is that in a bleak and depressing landscape it is important that we celebrate heroes, and Damian Aspinall, Amos Courage and the team that work with them are heroes, and they need to be celebrated for the work they do.
welfare, and he is absolutely right to raise this important issue. The protection of endangered species around the world is a key priority for this Government, as we reaffirmed in our manifesto earlier this year. Both domestically and internationally, a strong economy needs a healthy environment. That requires healthy ecosystems, global biodiversity and the conservation of species. An estimated 40% of world trade is based on natural resources, but pressures on the global environment are increasing. Major ecosystems, and the species to which they are home, support the livelihoods of billions of people, but they are under threat. In short, protecting animals is as vital for us as it is for them.

We are taking action, bilaterally and through international agreements, to protect wildlife populations, whether they are threatened by poaching, habit loss or human-animal conflict. The United Kingdom is recognised as a global leader on environmental issues, whether by raising the illegal wildlife trade up the international agenda or through our commitment to tackling climate change, deforestation and ocean acidification.

We recognise the ongoing threat to elephants throughout much of Africa, so this month we announced our plans to ban the trade in ivory in the UK. We had already effectively limited trade in modern worked ivory and in raw ivory. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford says it is "too little, too late". I am concerned that he is not being generous enough, given that we already had the toughest laws and licensing regime in the European Union. I assure him that, if they go ahead as planned, the proposals will be the toughest in the world, except for those in India. I assure him that we are taking forward this important agenda.

The ban will build on the range of activities that we already undertake throughout Africa, to demonstrate further our global leadership in efforts to protect elephants and consign the ivory trade to history. We welcome the steps taken by other countries, particularly the USA and China, which has the largest market demand for ivory, to restrict their ivory markets. It is only through such international commitment and global co-operation that we will end this pernicious, blood-thirsty trade.

Nevertheless, I am sure my hon. Friend will recognise that the greater threat to animals in peril is habitat decline, whether because of direct human intervention or climate change. Deforestation not only destroys critical habitats for biodiversity but causes 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions. As Members will see later this month in “Blue Planet II”, significant impacts on the polar ice caps are threatening wildlife directly, while ocean acidification threatens the food web itself.

Forests support 90% of the world’s biodiversity, regulate water quality and mitigate climate change by absorbing and storing carbon. More than 1.6 billion people depend on forests for food, medicine and livelihoods. The UK is determined to eliminate deforestation in developing countries and is investing £5.8 billion through our international climate fund between 2016 and 2021, with additional focus on mitigation and adaptation. My Department is investing around £210 million to protect and restore more than 500,000 hectares of the world’s most biodiverse forests and create sustainable livelihoods for the 500,000 people who rely on their local ecosystems. These forests, from the mighty Amazon to mangroves in Madagascar, are also home to thousands of species of animals, birds, fish and insects, many of which are critically endangered.

We are aware that illegal logging can cause environmental and biodiversity damage, as well as having a disastrous effect on the people who live in and rely on forests. The UK has long been at the forefront of global action against illegal logging. As a result of the EU forest law enforcement, governance and trade plan, which the UK was instrumental in establishing, all timber exports from Indonesia are now certified as legal, compared with only 20% meeting that standard in 2005.

This year, we are marking the 25-year anniversary of the world-renowned Darwin initiative, which provides grants to projects in developing countries for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity. Since 1992, we have invested £140 million in 1,055 Darwin projects in 159 countries. The projects tackle issues that put animals in peril, from the loss of and damage to habitats caused by human activity, to the reduction of the use of poisonous pesticides. Recent projects have helped to conserve iconic species such as gorillas—I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), who is right to praise the work of the Aspinall Foundation—as well as snow leopards and elephants.

The Darwin initiative is also critical to the protection of some lesser known animals, including the Madagascan pochard, possibly the rarest bird in the world, which was saved from extinction, and the St Helena wirebird, whose conservation status has been downgraded from critically endangered to vulnerable. Darwin projects have also discovered new species—for example, a new amphibian in Colombia, and Madagascar and a new land-snail in Thailand—and led to the re-discovery of a rare crane fly on St Helena that was thought to be extinct for decades. That shows that we must continue to help conserve and protect habitats, creating places where animal populations not only survive, but thrive.

The Darwin Plus fund bolsters our commitments by protecting the unique diversity of our overseas territories, which are home to 85% of the UK’s critically endangered species. Invasive non-native species are a significant problem on many of the overseas territories as they can attack native species. That is why we are contributing nearly £2 million to eradicate mice from Gough Island, where they decimate local populations of seabird chicks.

We also aim to protect more than 4 million sq km of ocean around the overseas territories, making them safe havens for marine creatures. We will create a marine protected area around Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island in the South Atlantic, a UNESCO world heritage site that is home to northern rockhopper penguins and the Tristan albatross. Pitcairn’s new marine protected area permanently closes around 840,000 sq km to commercial fishing, thereby protecting species of fish found nowhere else on earth.

We also play a leading role in promoting the protection of whales and dolphins. We work tirelessly within the International Whaling Commission to improve the conservation and welfare of these animals. Earlier this year, the UK made a voluntary donation of £200,000 to tackle critical threats to welfare such as bycatch in fisheries. We are also a very strong voice against the commercial and scientific whaling undertaken by Norway, Iceland, and Japan. We regularly apply diplomatic pressure
to those countries to cease their activities, as I did just this week when I was at the G7.

The illegal wildlife trade is a serious criminal global industry. My hon. Friend will be aware that a lot of focus is on majestic species such as elephants, rhinos and lions, but the scale of illegal trade across all species is increasing. Indeed, pangolins are the most trafficked mammal. Unfortunately, their defence mechanism is to roll into a ball, which makes them even easier to poach and traffic. He should also be aware that flora is even more trafficked than fauna, including many plants, and rosewood has the greatest value of all. Early this year, a focused operation by Interpol across 43 countries seized birds, reptiles, seahorses and many other endangered species. I can assure him that the criminal enterprise of this scale is, unfortunately, only possible due to shocking levels of corruption. Therefore, in addition to legislative action, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is investing £26 million—that was announced by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House when she was Environment Secretary—which is double our previous investment. We are doing that to try to reduce demand, to strengthen law enforcement and to develop sustainable livelihoods for communities that live alongside such animals in peril.

There is also considerable work being done to develop sustainable wildlife tourism economies. Next October, the UK will host the fourth international conference on tackling illegal wildlife trade. We are committed to working with our international partners around the world to tackle the growing problem of illegal wildlife trade. Indeed, it is working with other nations to reduce demand and disrupt this crime that will truly make the difference. For this reason, the UK and China are jointly developing a law enforcement training project in southern Africa, fulfilling the commitment that we made at the 2017 illegal wildlife trade conference in Hanoi.

The UK is an active participant in the Convention on International Trade in International Species. At the last conference in which I participated, the UK was involved with up-listing a number of species from appendix II to appendix I under the convention, which means that they are now afforded enhanced protection from such trade. These species include one of the species to which my hon. Friend referred—the African grey parrot—as well as the Barbary macaque, the turquoise dwarf gecko and the Chinese crocodile lizard. The 12th conference of the Convention on Migratory Species is meeting later in October and we will continue to work to ensure that more species are afforded greater protection.

My hon. Friend was absolutely right to refer to the domestic species, but he will recognise that our focus is on pressures on habitat, which will continue to pose challenges, whether that be domestically or abroad. Our work to date shows that it is possible, with effort and commitment, to improve the chances of some of our most endangered species. It is not something that the UK can do alone. Global action is needed and global responsibility is required, but I can assure him and the House that the UK will play its part.

Question put and agreed to.

8.4 pm

House adjourned.
Mr Hayes: I would not want to pick from among all my favourite towns. However, there are concerns about the inconsistent application of regulation and guidance, which is one of the things that the working party is considering. The key thing is that there has been a lot of change, partly as a result of modern communications and how people access information and book taxis and private hire vehicles. As Disraeli said: “Change is inevitable. Change is constant.”

But a benevolent and diligent Government must constrain change while maintaining choice.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): When the Communities and Local Government Committee considered child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, one issue was the involvement of some taxi drivers. The Government’s commissioners brought in higher standards, including the provision of CCTV cameras in all taxis. However, those rules can be undermined by taxis coming from places outside Rotherham where the same standards do not apply. Indeed, taxis that fail the test in Rotherham can go elsewhere, get a licence and drive back into Rotherham. That is the real problem. The problem is national, but does the Minister recognise that it is particularly acute in Rotherham? When will he act?

Mr Hayes: As I said, this is not just about London; it is about places across the country. There is a case for new statutory guidance, and while I do not want to second guess the working party and its recommendations, I think we will issue some new statutory guidance early next year.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Following the high-profile cases of child sexual abuse in Rotherham and Oxford, taxi licensing was strengthened in those council areas. However, despite repeated calls for legislation reform, including from the Law Commission, the Government have refused to close the loopholes that allowed drivers to be licensed elsewhere and effectively game the system. Will the Minister commit to introducing national standards to ensure safety across the industry?

Mr Hayes: I welcome the hon. Lady’s question. She is right that the system is being gamed. Where a local authority tightens the system—Leeds City Council described this to me yesterday—neighbouring authorities sometimes adopt a more permissive regime. That cannot be right, which is why I want to introduce new guidance and greater consistency in how licences are issued. At the end of the day, this has to be about public safety, security and wellbeing. The whole House would want that, and we really do have to take action.
Leaving the EU: Civil Aviation

2. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to prepare the civil aviation sector for the UK leaving the EU. [901276]

3. Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the aviation sector of the UK leaving the EU. [901279]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We want our future relationship with the European Union to be mutually beneficial. It is in the interests of both sides to maintain closely integrated aviation markets. However, it is the Government’s responsibility to prepare for all potential outcomes. The Government continue to work closely with the aviation sector to ensure the industry continues to be a major success story for the British economy.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What European destination would want to turn away planes loads of spending British tourists?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. Those with any concerns about 2019 just have to answer the question: how many hotels in Spain would be empty if the Spanish Government choose not to continue our aviation arrangements? That is why we will continue to make good progress towards satisfactory arrangements for the future.

Fiona Onasanya: In light of that answer, can the Secretary of State give an assurance that the Government will pursue an unchanged operating environment for the aviation sector in the Brexit negotiations with the EU?

Chris Grayling: I can give the hon. Lady that assurance. We believe it would benefit all the nations of Europe to continue the freedom of the aviation sector that we have seen over the past decade and more. That freedom particularly benefits regional economies and regional airports across the European Union, in this country and elsewhere. It would be foolish for anyone to try to stop that freedom.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The nine freedoms of the air guaranteed under the European common aviation area have enabled the growth of low-cost air travel, with average leisure fares to Europe falling by a third since 1993. We have already seen easyjet hedge against a no-deal scenario, but what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the implications of the UK falling back on the Chicago convention? What would that mean for the future of UK airlines, UK airports and affordable flights for UK consumers?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady needs to remember that aviation regulation operates at a global level, at a pan-European level—in which there is an “open skies” agreement—and at a national bilateral level. I have worked carefully with the airlines and all those involved, and I am certain that not only will aviation continue post-2019 but that everyone wants aviation to continue post-2019.

The individual case of easyJet relates to the question of cabotage within the European Union, which is clearly a matter for debate. It will be a negotiation for the whole sector because, although we have successful airlines such as easyJet operating flights within the rest of the European Union, we also have a large number of continental hauliers doing business within the United Kingdom. It is to everyone’s benefit that such liberalisation continues.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): European competition law will no longer apply after Brexit, so how does the Secretary of State propose to allocate airport slots? By auction, or in some other way?

Chris Grayling: Of course, the big question is about the expansion of slots at Heathrow airport in particular, which will be a matter for the Government both to negotiate and agree. Right at the top of our priority list in allocating slots—and we have committed to this in what we have said about the proposed expansion of Heathrow airport—is that we reserve slots for regional connectivity. One of the key benefits of Heathrow airport expansion is the global connections it will provide to cities across the whole United Kingdom. Whatever approach we take, we need protection for those regional links.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The Secretary of State may be in denial, but the Chancellor has finally fessed up to the fact that, if there is no Brexit deal, it is conceivable that flights between the UK and the EU might be grounded. Is it not time for the Government to get their finger out and give the reassurances that the aviation sector so badly needs?

Chris Grayling: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman, an experienced lawyer, did not read everything the Chancellor said. The Chancellor said that that was not going to happen and that, therefore, he will not spend a lot of money preparing for it. The actual reality is that we are doing a lot of preparatory work for all eventualities but, of course, the reason the Chancellor said what he said is that, as he says, that is not going to happen.

London Underground

3. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Mayor of London on upgrading the London Underground. [901277]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): As I said a few moments ago, Ministers and officials from my Department regularly meet the Mayor and his representatives to discuss transport in London. These meetings cover a wide range of issues, including upgrades to the London underground.

Theresa Villiers: The London underground upgrade was stalled for years under Labour but has made big progress under the Conservatives. So does the Minister share my regret that under the new Labour Mayor at city hall we are seeing vital upgrades shelved indefinitely?

Mr Hayes: My right hon. Friend is right to be disappointed; the Mayor has decided to pause the purchase of new trains for these lines, as she describes. As she
knows, transport in London is a matter for the Mayor and it is for him to agree the investment programme for transport, but it is a disappointment and he must do much better.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Whether we are talking about the 1974 Piccadilly line trains, which are almost as old as me, or the even less reliable 1992 Central line ones, autumnal leaf fall at the moment is causing havoc for the above-ground sections of the tube in suburban locations. Does the Minister know when these old workhorses that are now past their sell-by date are going to be sent to the knacker’s yard?

Mr Hayes: I can sense, as you probably can, Mr Speaker, a clamour coming from across the House. The rallying cry I have issued is that the Mayor must do more and better, and it seems that the hon. Lady joins my calls.

Shipley Eastern Bypass

4. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If he will provide funding for a Shipley eastern bypass. [901278]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Government have allocated significant resources to West Yorkshire for local transport schemes through the local growth fund, including £781 million over 30 years from local growth funding and “gain share”. In addition, I am pleased to be able to inform him this morning that £2.3 million is being allocated to Bradford Council for improved traffic management systems as part of the £244 million NPIF—national productivity investment fund—funding being announced today. Later this year, we will start consultation on the major route network, which may provide the routes to securing the Shipley eastern bypass that he is concerned about.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer and I very much welcome the new bypass fund that he is setting up, appreciating the difficulties that many motorists have in getting around. Does the new fund mean the long wait that local businesses, local residents and I have suffered waiting for a Shipley bypass may soon be at an end?

Chris Grayling: As I indicated, it is very much my hope that a number of schemes around the country will start to be brought forward for development under this fund. I would be rather surprised if the Shipley eastern bypass is not one of those brought forward as a proposal to the Government early on. As he knows, I will be joining him to see the issues around the Shipley eastern bypass and to see the possible routes shortly, and I have no doubt that he and his colleagues in his constituency will be making strong representations when I visit.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): No one begrudges the money for a Shipley bypass—certainly no one in Huddersfield does. What we are angry about in Yorkshire is the fact that this Minister has taken away the money and the promise for a trans-Pennine railway electrification. That is what we will not forgive him for. He must get his act together and invest in the north.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has gone way off the road, he really has.

Mr Sheerman: I did mention Shipley.

Mr Speaker: He mentioned Shipley but it is not sufficient simply to animadvert on Shipley. The question ought to relate to the matter. [Interruption] Which is a bypass, as somebody has observed, very originally and wittily from a sedentary position.

Chris Grayling: It is worth putting on the record that I have not announced any changes to that programme. There is money for the trans-Pennine modernisation. I am expecting the detailed proposals from Network Rail later this year. However, it is worth saying that we are spending more money on more projects across the north of England than any Government have for decades and decades, including during the 13 years when Labour was in government. It is also worth saying that we have electrified four times as many miles of railway in the north of England alone than Labour did in 13 years in government. So I am not going to take any lessons from Labour Members about commitments to the modernisation of the transport system—in the north or elsewhere.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) rose—

Mr Vickers: Many of my constituents would like to visit Shipley on many occasions, but in order to do so that they would have to travel along concrete sections of the A180, which causes great disturbance to residents in Stallingborough and other villages in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State urge Highways England to look favourably on funding improvements to that section of the A180?

Chris Grayling: I know that Highways England listens carefully to the comments made at Transport questions. My hon. Friend highlights something that is an issue in his area and throughout the country. I am clear that we need to do everything we can to ensure that the technology for future road surfaces delivers both durability and quietness.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes! I chaired the South Lakes Pupil Parliament in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency on Friday. The children there spoke of him with great warmth and affection.

Tim Farron: That is very kind of you, Mr Speaker; I hope you will indulge me. Just like Shipley, Kendal is a beautiful northern town with severe congestion problems. It is beautiful and thriving despite the fact that it has a prehistoric road network. Is the Secretary of State aware that there is a long-stalled plan for a northern access route that would solve congestion in the town and open up the industrial estates to the north-east of the town? Will he meet me and business leaders to see whether we can move things forward and make that plan happen?
Chris Grayling: I am always happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. I am not aware of the specific scheme he asked about, but it is precisely for the reasons he outlined that I have set aside money to create the bypass fund for the years ahead. I recognise that in a number of important regional towns too many areas are congested as a result of through traffic. That is particularly true in the Lake district and the major route through Kendal to get to places such as Windermere. I will happily talk to the hon. Gentleman about that.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough)(Con): Wellingborough is very similar to Shipley—one might even argue that the two MPs are rather alike in their views—but one problem that my constituents find in getting to Shipley is that they cannot get through Isham because a bypass has not been built. Is the Secretary of State able to offer some encouragement about the Isham bypass, which would enable my constituents to get to Shipley more easily?

Chris Grayling: May I first wish my hon. Friend a happy birthday? I am slightly surprised to see him wearing a more muted tie today. Although I cannot give assurances on every individual scheme, it is very much my intention that the bypass fund is there to fill in holes in what was once the strategic network. The network was de-trucked many years ago, leaving congestion problems in many regional towns and on many important regional routes, without an obvious and clear route to secure funding to ease that congestion. In the coming months I will consult colleagues from across the House as to how best we manage the process of getting that fund and those projects going.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As a Yorkshire MP, it is always good to see promises of investment in places such as Shipley. Nevertheless, this summer the Secretary of State said to The Yorkshire Post:

“The success of Northern transport depends on the North”.

Will he explain how, with London getting 10 times as much money for transport investment as Yorkshire and the Humber gets, that is going to happen?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid some of the figures bandied around by think-tanks in the north are simply inaccurate. We are putting more investment into transport in the north of England than there has been for decades and decades—into the road system and the rail system. We are replacing every single train in the north with either a brand new train or one that has been refurbished as new. It is a long-overdue programme. It did not happen in 13 years under a Labour Government, when there was money aplenty. Even in tighter financial times, we see it as a priority to develop transport in the north, and that is what we are doing.

Leaving the EU: Aviation Agreements

6. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the timetable for introducing new aviation agreements after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I meet my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Exiting the European Union and for International Trade regularly—indeed, I did so yesterday—to discuss the UK’s exit from the EU. Seeking new aviation arrangements—both with the EU and with those states where we currently rely on EU-negotiated arrangements for market access—is a high priority for my Department. We aim to have the new arrangements in place well before the day of exit.

Deidre Brock: The Secretary of State obviously agrees with the absolute need for aviation agreements, through either bilateral means or an EU-wide arrangement. Will he tell us how many DFT staff have expertise in negotiating aviation deals and how many are working on deals as we speak?

Chris Grayling: I have a big team that is experienced in dealing with such things, because, across the world, we have bilateral arrangements with countries in all continents. I have experienced teams that are working on that right now. We are pursuing the necessary successor arrangements that we will need for flights to countries around the world, and there is nothing but good will and constructive discussion between us and those countries in ensuring that there is no interruption in flying.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Not only is the aviation timetable agreement important, but so is the securing of routes. Will the Minister tell us what has been done to secure routes for Belfast City and Belfast International airports to make sure that Dublin does not receive, to our detriment, the routes that we should be getting instead?

Chris Grayling: Of course, the choice of routes is ultimately down to the airlines themselves, but the hon. Gentleman will know that we provide significant support for important links from Northern Ireland, and we will continue to do so. The biggest difference for Northern Ireland will come with the expansion of Heathrow airport towards which we are working at the moment, and a guarantee of slots to provide excellent connectivity for Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales into countries around the world.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Scottish Government have not been able to cut air passenger duty because the UK Government have not properly implemented an exemption for Inverness airport. Given the importance of low-cost carriers to Scotland’s regional airports, it is important that the Scottish Government are also involved in any discussions. However, to allow sufficient time for EU ratification, the aviation agreements need to be concluded by October 2018. How many staff does the Secretary of State have working on these matters, and what guarantees can he provide that travel will continue uninterrupted?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes his comment about air passenger duty in Scotland, but we did what the Scottish Government asked: we devolved air passenger duty and they have not cut it. I am afraid that they are discovering the realities of government. It is all very well making demands from the Opposition Benches, but when they actually have to take tough decisions,
they discover that it is not all that easy. We are seeing that they are failing to deliver for the people of Scotland. When it comes to planning for aviation after Brexit, things are different, because we are planning for that and we will deliver. We will see, post 2019, that aviation continues to be the success story that it is today.

Road Transport Emissions

7. **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to reduce harmful emissions from road transport.  

8. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to accelerate the availability of smart ticketing on the rail network.

9. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): E10 fuel can reduce emissions from road transport. Can the Minister confirm the Government’s commitment to introducing E10 in the UK in 2018?

10. **Jesse Norman**: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have been looking closely at this issue and will make an announcement in due course.

Railways: Smart Ticketing

11. **Paul Maynard** (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to introduce smart ticketing across its network. I have also put in a request for the Oyster system to extend south of Gatwick airport to Three Bridges and Crawley stations. However, will my hon. Friend please speak urgently with GTR, the parent company of Southern, as their new ticket machines at many stations, including Three Bridges, have been malfunctioning, causing passengers significant disruption and queues? That situation needs to be resolved.

12. **Paul Maynard**: I am grateful for that comment. Ticket vending machines, which are meant to be among the most straightforward of equipment on our railways, seem to cause more problems than any other type of equipment. I understand that Govia Thameslink Railway is due to visit every ticket machine over the coming fortnight to make sure that the software is updated and that the machine functions properly, although I share my hon. Friend’s concern and will be meeting the supply chain in due course to emphasise the importance of getting this right.

13. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I welcome Southern railway’s plans to introduce smart ticketing across its network. I have also sent a request for the Oyster system to extend south of Gatwick airport to Three Bridges and Crawley stations. However, will my hon. Friend please speak urgently with GTR, the parent company of Southern, as their new ticket machines at many stations, including Three Bridges, have been malfunctioning, causing passengers significant disruption and queues? That situation needs to be resolved.

14. **Paul Maynard**: I am grateful for that comment. Ticket vending machines, which are meant to be among the most straightforward of equipment on our railways, seem to cause more problems than any other type of equipment. I understand that Govia Thameslink Railway is due to visit every ticket machine over the coming fortnight to make sure that the software is updated and that the machine functions properly, although I share my hon. Friend’s concern and will be meeting the supply chain in due course to emphasise the importance of getting this right.

15. **Jesse Norman**: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have been looking closely at this issue and will make an announcement in due course.
they are escalated to what is called the national taskforce, where the train operating company must present to the wider industry what measures it is taking to reverse poor performance, and I will then meet that train operating company. I recognise the concerns around Northern. My primary concern at this stage is to ensure that new infrastructure is opened around the Greater Manchester area so that Northern can operate new rolling stock to replace the appalling Pacers, and introduce the new services that the Ordsall Chord, in particular, will enable.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Can the Minister require train operators to allow passengers who start their journey at a station that has no ticket facilities to use a print-at-home ticket, so that passengers at Langley Mill station in my constituency can actually use the cheaper advance tickets that they currently cannot?

Paul Maynard: I think that is a perfectly fair observation. We are seeking to ensure that when technology enables new forms of ticketing to be introduced, we move on that as far as possible. That includes paperless ticketing. It also includes work on barcode ticketing, which can be displayed on mobile phones. We have to do much better at ensuring that people may choose the ticket mode that works best for them.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome what the Minister says about smart ticketing, but in advance of that, might he have a word with the rail authorities about how many tickets they send out? When someone pre-books, they get between eight and 10 tickets. Surely it is not beyond the wit and wisdom of the rail companies to put that information on one ticket. I hate to think how many forests we cut down for one rail journey.

Paul Maynard: I think that the rail authorities have already heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. I have noticed that I now get my seat reservation and my ticket on the same piece of paper, instead of on five. As we move towards more forms of paperless ticketing, we should have no pieces of paper at all unless we want them.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We were told £45 million, but the cost was £96 million. We were told 11 train operators co-ordinated, but it was just five working separately. We were told all passengers, but it was just season ticket holders, and full season ticket holders at that. Only 8% of those now eligible are ticket holders at that. Only 8% of those now eligible are using the system, with its scope cut, and it being overspent and massively overtime—and then the Government handed the problem back to the train operators. From this example in the south-east, can we really have confidence that the Government can deliver smart ticketing?

Paul Maynard: There is quite a straightforward reason why we can have confidence about the future, and it is largely because the south-east flexible ticketing programme did not just deliver smart ticketing across the south-east, which many passengers are now using, but put in place the architecture and computer systems that will enable smart ticketing on national rail to be a success.

Rachael Maskell: Well, it was a pretty damning report from the National Audit Office. Yet again we have a Government unable to deliver on the railways and on something as simple as smart ticketing. Labour will be at the cutting edge of rail tech, while this Government still expect people to book separate tickets from separate operators—one national chaos under the Tories, one national public service with Labour. How much longer will the Government champion fragmented ticketing on a fragmented railway?

Paul Maynard: I always get rather frustrated when people have had an answer but paid no attention to what I said—but there we go. The report from the National Audit Office was important. It contained a number of lessons, which we took on board when setting out the national smart ticketing programme. Technology is changing rapidly. We have to make sure that the schemes we put in place now meet what technology can do in a year’s time, or two or three years’ time. We will be moving fast with tickets, and tickets will be unbelievably advanced by the time the Labour party ever gets back into power.

Strategic Road Network: Congestion

9. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce congestion on the strategic road network.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Tackling congestion, as you will know, Mr Speaker, is at the forefront of the Government’s plans to provide a modern strategic road network that supports our growing economy. The Government are investing in the largest programme of improvements on our national roads that we have seen for many decades, as the Secretary of State said—£15 billion between 2015 and 2021 alone. In addition to providing extra capacity on the busiest motorways by making them smart motorways, the Government will improve specific parts of the network where investment can tackle congestion, improve journeys and support economic growth.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I welcome the Government’s investment in a feasibility study into finally building junction 18A on the M4. However, one of the options under consideration is to build that new junction at Pucklechurch, which would devastate the local green belt and divide two extremely historic communities. With the decision expected early next year, residents are being left under a cloud of uncertainty, so will the Minister speak to Highways England to ensure that this undeliverable and unsupportable proposal is ruled out as early as possible?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting Highways England’s work to develop proposals that would improve access to the M4. The scheme will be vital to unlocking the potential for housing developments in that area. As he will know, the Secretary of State has seen the site for himself, and he and I are taking the issue very seriously. I will be discussing it, among other things, with Highways England when I see its chief executive next week.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Is not the real answer to cutting road congestion, and for that matter roadside emissions, to invest in expanding rail capacity? For example, Peel at the port of Liverpool is investing £750 million, including in rail freight. Why are the Government not stepping up and playing their part?
Jesse Norman: I thoroughly dispute the idea that the Government are not playing their part, not least because we are heavily investing in HS2, which will run very close to that port and support it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that many Harlow motorists face significant problems from ever-increasing congestion and the ever-increasing number of terrible accidents on the M11? Will he investigate that to see what can be done?

Jesse Norman: We are absolutely aware of these issues and officials focus on them, as they do on issues in other parts of the road network, but I would be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend to look at the issue further.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): As has been said, reducing congestion on our roads requires serious investment in our rail infrastructure, so when will the Government give the north our fair share of rail investment and, in particular, agree to a Crossrail of the north that is fully integrated with HS2 at Piccadilly station?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will know, the Secretary of State made clear—that one of the most common topics for discussion is how to ensure that Crossrail 2 is both affordable and fair to the taxpayer. It is really important that we do not unduly raise public expectations or, indeed, provoke undue concerns in relation to Crossrail 2 ahead of developing a fair, sustainable and deliverable funding plan.

Crossrail 2: Safeguarding Directions

10. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What plans has he to issue safeguarding directions for the unsafeguarded sections of the Crossrail 2 route.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): A thorough analysis of the Crossrail 2 business case is being carried out by the Department to ensure it is a robust scheme, as is undertaken for all transport scheme proposals. Once this analysis has been completed, the Secretary of State will be in a position to outline the next steps on Crossrail 2, which will include any discussions and decisions on future plans for updating the current safeguarding directions.

Stephen Hammond: I listened carefully to the Minister’s answer. However, the delay to Crossrail 2 is causing real anxiety to constituents in Wimbledon and across south London and causing investment decisions to be delayed. Will he urge the Mayor to get on with the funding proposals so that the Department can make a decision one way or the other?

Paul Maynard: As Members have heard this morning, we have regular meetings with the Mayor. I assure my hon. Friend that one of the most common topics for discussion is how to ensure that Crossrail 2 is both affordable and fair to the taxpayer. It is really important that we do not unduly raise public expectations or, indeed, provoke undue concerns in relation to Crossrail 2 ahead of developing a fair, sustainable and deliverable funding plan.

Tyne and Wear Metro

11. Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): When his Department plans to make a decision on the mechanism for the Tyne and Wear metro to receive funding to replace and renew its rolling stock.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): The Department accepts the need to replace the Nexus fleet and is actively discussing the most appropriate method of funding this vital work with Nexus and the Treasury.

Ian Mearns: The metro system’s rail stock is more than 40 years old, and I am afraid to say that it is failing on a daily basis, causing delays for its 40 million users each year. On 17 July, nine of my right hon. and hon. Friends representing the Tyne and Wear area and I wrote to the Secretary of State about this issue. We again wrote to him on 12 September asking for at least an acknowledgement of our concerns. It may surprise you, Mr Speaker, to hear that we have not yet had an acknowledgment, never mind a reply. My patience is wearing a little thin on this. The people of Tyne and Wear deserve much better from this Government, even though they have no MPs in the area.

Paul Maynard: I am always disappointed when I hear that we do not achieve what we should in our correspondence. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has not had an acknowledgment; we will draft one immediately today. I assure him that I personally understand the importance of the metro system to the people of the north-east. We understand the need to replace these ageing carriages, and we are keen to ensure that we make a decision as soon as possible.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Transport spend in the north-east is only £220 per head, compared with £2,000 per head in London, and the effect of that can be felt every single day on the Tyne and Wear metro. Will the Minister commit that the investment will be publicly funded, not coming from some financially engineered private finance initiative scheme, so that the public benefits of a decent transport system can be publicly controlled?

Paul Maynard: We continue to work closely with the Treasury to make sure that we get the right funding package to deliver these carriages, which I know the network needs. In response to the hon. Lady’s concern about levels of investment in her region, I point out that we are finally completing the motorway to the north-east that Labour never built in 13 years.

Bridge Tolls

13. Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of removing tolls on bridges.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is Government policy that those who benefit from the significant improvements that estuarial crossings bring should help to pay for them. Successive Governments have taken the view that tolls are justified when private finance enables key road infrastructure such as significant river crossings to proceed and to be maintained.

Faisal Rashid: I am sure that the Minister will be aware that residents in my constituency are paying in excess of £1,000 a year in toll charges for the new Mersey Gateway bridge, although the previous Runcorn
bridge was toll-free and tolls are being scrapped across the whole United Kingdom. Will he honour the commitment made in 2015 by the former Chancellor, George Osborne, that Warrington residents would be exempt from these tolls? Although the Minister has previously rejected this offer, will he now agree to meet me and my constituents?

**Jesse Norman:** I am not aware of having rejected any previous invitation. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and his constituents. The Government’s position is very clear. We intend that the tolls will go when the bridge has been paid for. Unfortunately, when crossings are being tolled, there has to be equality, because otherwise the untolled bridge ends up being loaded up to the point where the original purpose is defeated. The good news is that this is a major piece of new infrastructure, and that is all to the good.

**Cycling**

14. **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to promote cycling.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):** The Government want to make cycling and walking the natural choices for short journeys and parts of longer journeys. In April this year, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we published the first ever statutory cycling and walking investment strategy for England. The strategy sets out our plans for increasing cycling and walking, and it identifies £1.2 billion of funding for the period up to 2021.

**Mike Kane:** I am due to go for a bike ride with the Greater Manchester cycling commissioner, Chris Boardman, in a few weeks’ time. As he is a former Olympic champion and maillot jaune holder, I am not looking forward to it and I am spending a lot of time in the gym. Chris is about to publish his strategy for Greater Manchester. What resources will the Minister put at Chris’s disposal, so that he can implement it?

**Jesse Norman:** I wish the hon. Gentleman very good luck in his ride with Chris Boardman, and I hope that Chris knows what he is letting himself in for. I have met both the Mayor of Manchester and Chris directly to discuss this strategy, and Chris has been kind enough to share it with me and my officials. Of course, from a central Government standpoint, we will do what we can to support it.

**Regional Transport Infrastructure Investment**

16. **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the equity of the distribution of regional transport infrastructure investment.

**The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes):** The most recently published statistics on the distribution of regional transport infrastructure investment appear in Her Majesty’s Treasury’s “Country and Regional Analysis November 2016”.

**Dan Jarvis:** In response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), the Secretary of State seemed to cast doubt on the existence of inequalities in regional infrastructure spend. He should know that Yorkshire and the Humber has the lowest per capita regional infrastructure investment in the country at just £1,990 per head, compared with £1,900 per head in London. What are the Government going to do to address that basic unfairness?

**Mr Hayes:** I always try to be helpful in the Chamber, and I know that the hon. Gentleman is doing his best, but a lot of what has been published about this is, quite frankly, just wrong. He may be drawing on the Institute for Public Policy Research North figures, which do not take account of the whole picture. They consider only 40% of the national infrastructure pipeline, exclude schemes that cross regions and ignore the majority of smaller transport schemes. He is a diligent constituency MP, so he will know that they do not include—perhaps he has not factored this in either—the work that is being done on local roads at junction 36 of the M62. I hope that when he stands up to speak again in this Chamber, he will welcome the Government’s commitment to his area of the north of England.

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is closely familiar with junction 36, about which, I dare say, we shall hear more in due course.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): May I urge my right hon. Friend to be very granular when making such sub-regional assessments, to ensure within a regional context that rural areas, not just urban areas, secure the funding that they need?

**Mr Hayes:** As my hon. Friend, who is such a great champion of his constituents, knows, I am a representative of Lincolnshire, so I could hardly fail to have rural interests deep in my heart.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): This week, the OECD argued that addressing the regional productivity divide between high-productivity areas, such as London, and lower productivity regions can be a key channel for fostering long-term growth and sharing prosperity. Does the Minister not accept that the Government’s cuts to rail upgrades will entrench regional transport inequalities and damage business by embedding the regional productivity divide?

**Mr Hayes:** Let us try to find common cause, shall we? It is absolutely right that we look at regional investment inequalities, and it is absolutely right, too, that we do not regard all investment in the south of England as good, while ignoring the rest. The Government are not doing that; that is the point. The Government are rebalancing investment across the whole kingdom, for we recognise that. I could be tiresome—[Interruption.] I know that that is hard to believe, but I could be, if I were to list the series of investments we are making in rail and road across the north. Rather than tiring you, Mr Speaker, or the House, we will set them out in a note, which we will distribute afterwards. Perhaps, then, the hon. Gentleman will also try to find common cause. To start with, he might want to look at the transport investment strategy that we have published, which is a starting point for learners in this field.
Andy McDonald: The Secretary of State has claimed that cancelling upgrades means affected areas will be spared disruption and that electrification is no longer necessary because the same benefits will be achieved with bi-mode trains reliant on diesel. Is his policy to provide regions across our country with second-rate railways, and is not the reality that his claims about the wonders of polluting diesel are, like digging for victory, a load of tripe?

Mr Hayes: Again, I simply say, let us look at the facts. We are investing in rail in the north. After all, this Government are investing in Transport for the North to do exactly what he describes. It is true that we need to look at a range of technologies to achieve what we want, but the answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question is: new trains, faster routes, more rail, more road investment—what is there not to like about that?

Transport Infrastructure: Scotland

17. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What plans he has to develop transport infrastructure in Scotland.

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): I am up again—and up for it, by the way.

As my hon. Friend knows, transport powers are devolved in Scotland. Nevertheless, investments are being made by the UK Government in rail and road on both sides of the border help to bind our kingdom together—united forever.

Luke Graham: I thank my right hon. Friend. Friend, but what specific plans does he have to improve north-south rail connections other than High Speed 2, including the east coast main line, to ensure we truly are a connected kingdom?

Mr Hayes: For such a specific question, a specific answer is required. Investments in the east coast and west coast franchises will bring great benefits to the people of Scotland. An additional £2.7 billion has been given to the intercity express programme, providing 500 new carriages, increasing the number of seats by 20% and reducing journey times between many of the great cities of our united kingdom.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The port of Grangemouth in my constituency handles 80% of Scotland’s container traffic. Will the Minister advise us what discussions he has had with his Scottish counterpart regarding any post-Brexit delays at borders and traffic chaos or road jams in the Grangemouth area?

Mr Hayes: I was in discussion with my Scottish counterpart just this week—not on that subject, but we do communicate regularly. The next time I have the opportunity to speak to that gentleman, I will certainly raise the matter that the hon. Gentleman has raised in the Chamber today.

Local Roads

18. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the condition of local roads.

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): All the Christmases are coming together, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend will be pleased that we announced in July that we were awarding Cornwall County Council £5 million in addition to its normal funding towards a project that will target carriageway treatments to improve the quality and longevity of 53 sites on Cornwall’s rural roads. All works will be completed by April 2018.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that answer, but in rural areas such as Cornwall it is important to maintain not just the condition of the road surface but the verges and overhanging trees in particular. I recently visited a local bus company, Roselyn Coaches, which is spending many thousands of pounds a year repairing its buses because of damage caused by overhanging trees. Does the Minister agree that local authorities such as Cornwall County Council must use their powers to cut back trees and keep our buses running?

Mr Hayes: As I said in my first answer, we are doing our bit. My hon. Friend is assiduous in keeping Cornwall County Council on its toes. It is its responsibility to ensure that carriageways are properly cared for in the way he described, and it is not easy to keep such a flat-footed Lib Dem council on its toes.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman’s performances in the Chamber are always a source of great excitement—especially for the right hon. Gentleman.

Topical Questions

T1. Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Before I respond to any topical questions, may I take this opportunity to express my thanks, and I hope those of the whole House, to all those involved in the repatriation of passengers affected by the collapse of Monarch Airlines? It was a huge effort across government, but particularly by the Civil Aviation Authority, and we all have good reason to be thankful to the team involved.

Matt Warman: Boston is a growing port and a growing town. New housing developments have preserved a route for a Boston distributor road, with which I know my right hon. Friend is familiar, but what will he do to help us to deliver the expensive but vital bridge in the middle of the distributor road, which we cannot of course ask housing developers to fund entirely?

Chris Grayling: Indeed, as my hon. Friend knows from my past visits to Boston, I am well aware of the importance of the Boston bypass project. The town is situated on an A road with a congestion problem and is one of those for which I would expect to see proposals
come forward for the bypass fund. We will look very carefully at the bridge issue, and I am very happy to talk to him about that.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): You may not be aware of this, Mr Speaker, but just last week there was another great train robbery: £600 million was removed from Scotland’s rail budget because the Tories ripped up a long-standing funding formula. For the sake of Scottish rail users, will the Secretary of State get together with the Treasury and give Scotland the correct funding?

**Chris Grayling:** This is an historic moment: the Scottish National party is opposing a funding allocation that uses the Barnett formula. I was under the impression that it regarded the Barnett formula as sacrosanct. However, when the UK Government use the Barnett formula, it complains. The SNP cannot have its cake and eat it.

T2. [901265] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): The excellent Rail Minister is drawing up a new franchise for east midlands railways, which will improve the service. Will he be able to publish an indicative timetable, so that my constituents can see how their rail service will improve?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport** (Paul Maynard): I was more than happy to meet a cross-party delegation of Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire MPs this week to discuss this very issue. We have located the information that my hon. Friend desires, and I will place it in the Library and write to him.

T8. [901272] **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): If High Speed 3 connected Leeds and Manchester via the Calder Valley line, that would be an absolute game changer for my part of the world. Given that the Secretary of State was keen to spend time in my constituency during the general election campaign talking about how important rail was to the area, will he update the House on whether and when that connection could become a reality?

**Chris Grayling:** There is a two-stage programme of modernisation for rail in the north, despite the nonsense that the shadow Secretary of State was talking earlier. Initially, we are replacing every single train in the north. We have modernised the Calder Valley line and are about to launch the modernisation of the main trans-Pennine route between Leeds and Manchester.

Of course we have done other things, such as electrifying the railway line from Liverpool to Manchester and creating the first ever link between Manchester Victoria and Manchester Piccadilly. A whole range of things is happening. What we said at our conference and will be confirmed at the Budget is that we will set aside funding to create the links between HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail. I am now waiting for the detailed Transport for the North proposals for Northern Powerhouse Rail. In the short term, we modernise the trans-Pennine route, and in due course we will build Northern Powerhouse Rail to ensure that we have those better links for the future.

T3. [901266] **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): To make much-needed housing developments acceptable, it is essential to provide the right infrastructure—road structure, in particular—to cope with traffic increases. Often, only a small section of road is required: the small spine road through the proposed Staplegrove development in Taunton, for example. Although an application has been made to the housing infrastructure fund, will the Minister advise on what other pots of money might be available to make this housing acceptable?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport** (Jesse Norman): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the question. As she says, the Government made available £2.3 billion precisely for such schemes, as part of the national infrastructure fund. I would be delighted to have a good look at the scheme with officials and ministerial colleagues at the Department for Communities and Local Government. I direct her attention to the £12 billion that has been committed over the period 2015 to 2021 through the local growth fund, through local enterprise partnerships, to support local strategic projects.

**Nick Smith** (Blenau Gwent) (Lab): How is the Secretary of State holding Volkswagen to account for its emissions scandal?

**Jesse Norman:** To answer on my right hon. Friend’s behalf, I should say that the answer is in so far as the situation allows us to. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have not ruled out legal action of our own. We are waiting for the German legal authorities—under European law, given the origin of these technologies—to make their decisions. Once they have done that, we will take a final view. But we have been extremely clear about our view in general about how the company has behaved.

T4. [901267] **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): Community transport plays a vital role in connecting communities in rural areas in west Oxfordshire and throughout the country. Such groups are worried about the impact of the issue and use of section 19 and 22 permits. Will the Minister confirm that if local community groups are registered as not-for-profit organisations, they will not be treated as commercial providers even if they pay a driver and take a fare?

**Jesse Norman:** I have two things to say. First, we very strongly support community transport operators in general. Secondly, we have been under some pressure to clarify the rules regarding local transport operators who are tacitly operating commercially. I am sure that that is not the case in Oxfordshire, but it is in other parts of the country. If my hon. Friend’s transport authority has a difficulty, he is welcome to get it to talk to my officials and/or the Community Transport Association.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Shipping Minister will be aware of huge concerns regarding a time lag of almost an hour on a number of occasions between distress at sea and the tasking and launching of an RNLI boat. What can the Minister do to ensure shorter response times in that golden hour, particularly at Maritime and Coastguard Agency level? After all, RNLI men I know have told me that they would prefer 10 false alarms than to be late at the scene of a real distress call.

**Chris Grayling:** This is an historic moment: the Scottish National party is opposing a funding allocation that uses the Barnett formula. I was under the impression that it regarded the Barnett formula as sacrosanct. However, when the UK Government use the Barnett formula, it complains. The SNP cannot have its cake and eat it.
The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): This is a very serious matter, and the hon. Gentleman and I have met to discuss these issues. I take a very clear view that we must be rigorous in the way that we deal with them. There have been disasters, such as the Louisa disaster in his constituency. The first thing to do is to offer commiserations to all those involved. As he knows, I have spoken to the chief inspector of the marine accident investigation branch. I have asked for his view, as quickly as possible, on the very issues the hon. Gentleman raises. I will keep in close touch with him and other Members when I hear that view.

T5. [901268] Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): There was widespread excitement last December when the Secretary of State announced a plan to publish a rail strategy document. Will he say what progress he has made and whether he will publish the report that his Department has commissioned on the future of rail franchising?

Chris Grayling: I expect to set out our further plans on the rail industry very shortly.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Roshid), who was right to point out the impact of the new charges on the Mersey Gateway will have on his constituents, as well as the charges that are being introduced on the existing Silver Jubilee bridge, will the Minister tell us how many existing crossings, which were previously free, have had charges introduced on them in the past 10 years?

Jesse Norman: I would be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with that information, but one concern is what the cost to local authorities would be. When we ran the numbers, as part of the wider decision, it became clear that the five local authorities involved would have to pay an extra £350 million to £400 million. That is an important further consideration.

Mr John Hayes: I am very conscious of the sinking of the Solstice off the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. I have met him, too, and I know how much he cares about this issue. I care about it, too, so yes of course I will do that. Furthermore, let me be absolutely clear to him, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar and the whole House. In respect of looking at these matters with assiduity, we will leave no stone unturned. If there can be improvements, there will be improvements.

T7. [901271] Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Can the Minister provide an update on the progress of the mid-Cheshire rail line?

Paul Maynard: I certainly can. I was pleased to meet both my right hon. Friend and the mid-Cheshire rail line promotion group in her constituency back in August. Since then, we have been liaising with Transport for the North. She will be aware that one of its key strategic corridors is the Wales and the west stretch in the north-west. It is looking at how the mid-Cheshire rail line scheme fits into its strategic proposals, and I hope to hear more in due course.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): To return to community transport operators, many are concerned, including North Norfolk community transport, that the new ruling will push it under, with the loss of absolutely vital rural community transport links. What is the Minister doing to ensure that that does not happen? What is the timescale for the consultation? When will it actually come in, because the uncertainty is very dangerous?

Jesse Norman: I fully recognise the concern. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the Department is being very careful. There will be no rapid over-enforcement. We will give people as much chance as possible to show that their activities are not commercial in the required sense. We will launch the consultation later this autumn and then take it from there.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): In the same vein, I recently met Basildon community transport, which expressed grave concerns and is already pointing at a neighbouring community transport operator closing because of the uncertainty. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me, Basildon community transport and the Community Transport Association to clarify the situation?

Jesse Norman: Yes, of course. I have met the Community Transport Association to discuss this at length, as my officials have been doing for some time, and other community transport entities. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and his constituents.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Domestic air travel is surely an integral part of the UK’s transport infrastructure. In their planning for Heathrow expansion, how much have the Government budgeted to increase the number of domestic routes to London from Scotland, Northern Ireland, the north and the south-west?

Chris Grayling: I hope that this is not a question of our budgeting, because I hope that the links will provide strong commercial opportunities. Governments seldom fund airline routes except in specific cases, such as our recent decisions over the air link from Northern Ireland to Stansted. I hope, however, that the opportunities
created by the expansion of Heathrow airport for the regions around the country will mean a thriving trade and attract airlines to take those slots.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know that the Rail Minister will share my excitement at the prospect of the first new station in the bay since world war two at Edginswell. Will he agree to meet me and the local council to see how we can take this forward and what the prospects might be for new stations funding?

Paul Maynard: I am aware that it was one of the unsuccessful bidders in the most recent round of the new stations fund. We make a point of giving positive feedback whenever we can to help make sure that future bids have the maximum chance of success, so I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and his council to discuss how we can maximise the opportunities.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The service on the Treherbert line is shockingly bad. Trains are regularly cancelled. When there should be four carriages, there are often two. Obviously, there is to be a new franchise, let by the Welsh Government, but we need more investment in the rail network, and that is down to the Westminster Government. We have 6% of the railways in this country in Wales. Why do we only get 1% of the investment?

Chris Grayling: In Wales right now, we have the biggest electrification programme in the country coming soon; we have new trains coming to Cardiff, Swansea and Pembroke Dock; we have a big investment programme funded by central Government in the valley lines; and I am now looking at what changes we can make to the north Wales line, where there is a real need for improvement.
10.37 am

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State if he will update the House on Government action following the Grenfell Tower fire.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): It is now just over four months since the tragedy of Grenfell Tower. Since then, the Government, the local council and the wider public sector have been working hard to ensure that everyone affected by the fire gets the support they need and that all tall residential buildings across the country are safe.

Since I last updated the House on 5 September, the number of households seeking rehousing has risen to 202. As before, this increase has been caused by members of larger households choosing to be rehoused separately. The local council has now secured more than 200 suitable local permanent properties. Negotiations are under way on others, and by Christmas it expects to have more than 300 available. As of this week, 112 households have accepted an offer of either temporary or permanent accommodation. Of these, 58 have moved in, 44 into temporary accommodation and 14 into permanent accommodation.

The Government are determined that everyone who needs support gets it regardless of their immigration status. We have previously established a process to grant foreign nationals who were resident in Grenfell Tower or Grenfell Walk 12 months’ leave to remain in the country with full access to the relevant support and assistance. Last week, the Immigration Minister announced a dedicated route to permanent residency for the survivors. This policy will allow them to apply for free for two further periods of two years’ limited leave. After this time, they will be able to apply for permanent residence.

Meanwhile, our work to ensure the safety of other tall buildings continues. A total of 169 high-rise social housing buildings in England feature some of the aluminium composite material cladding, and our programme of testing has identified 161 that are unlikely to meet current fire safety standards. The particular focus of current efforts is now on supporting remedial work on those 161 buildings. We are also improving our understanding of the situation for the privately owned high-rise residential buildings with ACM cladding, so that all such buildings can be as safe as possible.

We have made clear to councils and housing associations that we expect them to fund measures that they consider essential to making buildings safe. However, if councils have concerns, they should get in touch with us. We will consider the removal of financial restrictions if they stand in the way of essential work. To date, 32 local councils have expressed concern to us in principle. We have liaised more closely with seven of those, and one of them has now submitted supporting evidence for consideration by my Department.

John Healey: The terrible tragedy of Grenfell Tower was a national disaster. At such times, people look to the Government to lead and to act. The survivors, and the relatives of at least 80 people who lost their lives, deserve no less. I do not doubt the Secretary of State’s good intentions, and I pay tribute to the work of the frontline staff, volunteers and local groups who helped immediately after the fire and are still helping to support the survivors; but, more than four months after the fire, the facts are these.

Only 14 of more than 200 Grenfell families have new homes. Fewer than one in 10 of the country’s 4,000 other high-rise tower blocks has been tested by the Government. The Secretary of State has refused any Government funds for essential fire safety work on other high-rise blocks. Can he confirm that 152 Grenfell households are still in hotels, although the Prime Minister said on 17 July:

“I have fixed a deadline of three weeks for everybody affected to be found a home”?

The Prime Minister told the House on 22 June:

“We can test more than 100 buildings a day”.

Can the Secretary of State confirm that, in fact, the Government have tested the cladding on fewer than 300 high-rise blocks? On 20 July, he told the House that the Government would “make sure that they have the support that they need.”

Can he confirm that he told the Communities and Local Government Committee last week that there would be no Government funding for councils or housing associations for essential retrofit fire safety work?

Grenfell survivors have a deep mistrust of those in power who failed to respect social housing residents for so long. When Ministers make pledges but fail to act, or fail to ensure that others act, that fuels a wider lack of trust and confidence. The buck stops at the top. Will the Secretary of State now, four months on, secure the extra homes that are needed for all the Grenfell families, provide the Government funds that are needed for urgent remedial work and to retrofit sprinklers, and set a date to come to the House to tell us that every other tower block in the country is safe—not “as safe as possible”, as the Secretary of State said earlier—for the people who live in it?

Many of the Government’s decisions, reviews and inquiries are good, but they will not be good enough until the Government get a grip, and get these fundamental problems sorted out.

Sajid Javid: I know that the right hon. Gentleman cares as deeply about helping the survivors of this terrible tragedy as I do, and as the entire Government do, and it is a real shame that he should try to treat it as some kind of political points-scoring opportunity. He knows exactly what the situation is, not least because I updated the Select Committee—whose members included his colleagues—just last week. The Committee had an opportunity to go into many of the issues in detail, as a Select Committee should, and I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman followed all that. This is not what the victims of the tragedy want to see, and it is not what the country wants to see. They want to see all of us working together to do whatever we can.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about housing. I have talked about that before, but I am happy to say again that the victims of what was easily one of the most terrible tragedies ever to have taken place in our country are people, not statistics. We must work with
them and listen to what their needs are. For example, there were 151 households at the start, with Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk—the two buildings—taken together, but we are now working with 202 households. That has happened because some of the survivors have asked to split where there are larger families or for other reasons, and we have listened to that. We have listened to every single case, and not one request has been turned down. That, of course, means we have to find even more permanent and temporary accommodation, but that is not our consideration; our consideration is the needs of the victims themselves.

It is right that every family should be properly assessed for their housing need, and should be listened to. Every single family has been offered an assessment by professional housing officers. Some of them have met a number of times, because if they change their mind we need to listen to them. Literally only a handful have not yet had that meeting, but that is at their request, because they are not ready; they will typically be a bereaved family who are not ready to engage. They would rather not go through that process now, and we have listened to them, too.

After the assessments, we have tried to determine—obviously the council was leading the work—whether the survivors wanted to be back in an apartment block again, or if they want a house, and whether there are any other needs. Some families say they do not want to live in the borough, but would prefer to move closer to family elsewhere. All of that is being listened to; we are trying to action all of that and listen to it.

There can be a time lag when families have identified a property—as I have said, 112 families have accepted offers of temporary or permanent accommodation. That lag occurs between acceptances and moving in, because every family has been offered a moving-in package so they can choose the décor, the furniture and any other things that will make their life comfortable. That has been listened to, and of course that will take time.

That is how we are treating these people: as real people and survivors, not as statistics. I know the right hon. Gentleman is not saying that they are statistics, but sometimes it does come across like that. I urge him to work with us, and to listen to what work is actually going on.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked me about the building test. I have given the House an update on the numbers, and a fuller update was given last week at the Select Committee. He asked particularly about the speed of the tests. The Prime Minister rightly said previously that the testing facilities can test up to 100 samples a day. They were specifically testing the samples of ACM—aluminium composite material—cladding that were sent in, and they were done at the speed that they were sent in; the testing facilities can only operate at the speed at which the samples are sent in.

Those tests have subsequently been superseded by the more comprehensive systems tests, which test the whole ACM cladding system. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, that was tested during the summer and it gave a fuller result. I have just shared the numbers of social buildings and private buildings tested so far, and following on from those results, both the interim remedial action plans that have been put in place.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked about council funding. He rightly said that I have stated before that I will make sure that all councils have the support they need. That is exactly what I and this Government are doing. Councils are rightly expected to carry out all essential works, and they will determine, as the legal owners of the properties, what is genuinely essential work; and if they cannot afford it, that should not be a reason not to do the work. Whether they are interim measures or the final remedial measures, the work must happen, and if the councils need support through financial flexibilities, we will provide that. Again, I gave a fuller account to the Select Committee, so perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will take another look at that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his comments. He is right: we must take the time that survivors ask of us. We cannot rush any survivor into making a decision with which they may eventually be uncomfortable. Even in circumstances, which have arisen, whereby survivors have accepted a property offer, moved in and then changed their minds and said, “Actually this is not what I wanted”, we should listen to them. We should work at their pace—that is the right thing to do.

Sajid Javid: Thank you, my hon. Friend for his comments. He is right: we must take the time that survivors ask of us. We cannot rush any survivor into making a decision with which they may eventually be uncomfortable. Even in circumstances, which have arisen, whereby survivors have accepted a property offer, moved in and then changed their minds and said, “Actually this is not what I wanted”, we should listen to them. We should work at their pace—that is the right thing to do.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Reacting to incidents such as Grenfell is always challenging. After the Prime Minister’s comments yesterday, there are more questions about the Government’s handling of the fire and its aftermath. In Scotland, a working group is reviewing evidence on fire suppression measures, including sprinklers to ensure the safety of residents in high-rise buildings. Sprinklers are only one of a range of risk-reduction measures, but we are reviewing them. The Government dismiss them, telling one council: “The fire safety measures you outline are additional rather than essential.”

Why do the Government seem to deem any risk-reduction measure as additional, not essential?

Ninety-two households have yet to be found new homes, despite rehousing being a priority. After four months, hundreds of people are still living out of suitcases and hotels and it is simply not good enough. It is time to stop the words—people need action. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that permanent homes will be found for everyone before Christmas?

Sajid Javid: I remind the hon. Gentleman that a full, independent review of building regulations and fire safety rules and regulations has been set up. That is one way in which we can make changes and learn lessons from the terrible tragedy.

The hon. Gentleman talked about what is essential and non-essential for fire safety. As I said a moment ago, we expect councils and housing associations to
take expert advice, certainly from their local fire and rescue service, but it is then for the council, not the Government, to determine what is essential.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What is the formal final total of fatalities? How many victims remain unidentified?

Sajid Javid: Obviously, the police conduct that work independently, but I can give my hon. Friend the latest number: 80 people are missing, presumed dead. That is the latest information that the police have, but they have committed to keeping people updated.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for coming to the Select Committee meeting and answering questions so thoroughly last week. I want to return to the point about the essential fire safety work that other councils have got to do on their tower blocks. The Secretary of State has talked about extra flexibilities, probably extra borrowing, for those councils, but he has ruled out any money from the Government to help fund the work. Does he realise that many councils may have to defer or cancel other essential maintenance work on properties, putting the lives and health and safety of other residents at risk? Will he reconsider and recognise that this is a national problem, and that the Government should at least share responsibility with local councils to deal with it?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work through the Select Committee and the scrutiny that he and his colleagues provide. Last week was a welcome opportunity to meet the Committee and discuss this and other issues.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about funding and whether the funding requirement could delay other work. Given that each council’s situation is different, I cannot give a general answer for all councils. I said to the Select Committee, and it is worth repeating to the House, that I have set out a process for a full, top-to-bottom review of social housing, not just of the rights of tenants and how they are treated—the redress systems—but of our approach as a country to social housing, which has not been looked at for a generation. We will set out our thoughts in a Green Paper and discuss them with the Select Committee and any other colleagues who want to talk about them. That is an appropriate way in which to consider the wider issues, including renovation, around social housing.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for coming to the House again today. He obviously recognises that the fire at Grenfell has implications for the wider area. What are the Government doing to listen to residents’ concerns and how are they addressing their needs?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised that point. He will know that in London in the wake of the tragedy we have asked councils to check the quality of buildings, not just the fire safety, but other matters. For example, cracks so big that you could put your hand into them were discovered in the walls of the Ledbury estate tower blocks in Southwark. All those issues, including structural matters, need to be looked at.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning has had a series of meetings and will travel across the country to meet and listen to social housing residents. There is also the Green Paper and the review that we are carrying out.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Following the fatal fires at Shirley Towers in Southampton and Lakanal House in Camberwell, coroners recommended retrofitting sprinklers in high-rise residential buildings to prevent deaths. Will the Secretary of State therefore explain why the Housing Minister recently wrote to Nottingham City Council to say that the sprinkler system that it requested was additional rather than essential? The Government should be doing everything in their power to prevent such tragedies, so should they not launch a separate formal review into the wider neglect of social housing? The failure to use the Grenfell inquiry to examine wider neglect is an act of neglect in itself.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman refers to the coroners’ reports following the two previous tragedies, and he is right that in both cases the coroner asked social housing providers to consider the provision of sprinklers. It was recommended that the then Secretary of State write to housing associations and councils to pass on that recommendation, which is exactly what the Secretary of State did at the time.

As for the wider funding issues, I have already answered that question.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The whole House will agree that it is important that those who have been directly affected by the fire have their voices heard, so will the Secretary of State update us on what meetings the Government have had with the victims?

Sajid Javid: My Department, which has been leading the Government effort, has been heavily involved right from day one of this tragedy, as have several councils—not just the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. London boroughs came together quickly under what is a called a gold command, and all councils have been involved in working with and listening to the victims.

Over the summer, a majority of the victims came together to set up Grenfell United under their own initiative, and there have been regular meetings with the group’s committee. I met the group at a meeting to which every survivor was invited, and the victims Minister and the Prime Minister have also met the group.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I was troubled to hear the Secretary of State tell the Communities and Local Government Committee that councils would be expected to reprioritise in order to complete essential fire safety works post-Grenfell. Will he confirm whether it is my constituents living in temporary accommodation and desperately waiting for a new home or those waiting for much-needed major works who should be reprioritised? Can he not see that, unless the Government provide grant funding for essential fire safety works, the long-term impact of the tragedy across the country will be a deepening of the housing crisis? We owe it to the victims and survivors to do better than that.
Sajid Javid: As we discussed at the Select Committee, councils are expected to do whatever work is necessary to keep people safe, including interim measures and final remedial measures. They will get support from the Government in the form of flexibilities that will allow them to do that work. The hon. Lady referred to other work, and I believe that I have answered the question about how that should be considered in a fuller review, because that issue is bigger than the essential work. We need to look beyond the essential work to see what else needs to be done by the Government to improve social housing more generally. I am sure she would welcome the steps that the Government have taken towards that, such as the commitment to put an additional £2 billion into social housing that was announced just a couple of weeks ago.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State’s comments about social housing and to hear that, as recommended by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, the Government are looking more closely at social housing issues. Will the Secretary of State update us on the first steps that are being taken to put something in place?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend refers to the Green Paper on social housing that we are already working on. One of the key ways in which we will develop that paper is by listening to people who already live in social housing—not just those in one area. London is important, but we want to listen to people from across the country about the issues they face in terms of the quality and type of social housing. We want to hear about redress and how to ensure that we can have a better system, so that we can listen and take action when residents come up with issues.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State imagine a situation in which so many thousands of people were in potential danger that would not be treated as a national issue for the Government? We have a Secretary of State who is trying to wash his hands of responsibility. The commissioner of the London fire brigade says that retrofitting sprinklers in tower blocks “can’t be optional, it can’t be a nice-to-have”. Does the Secretary of State agree with the commissioner, and will he work with local authorities to retrofit sprinklers in tower blocks?

Sajid Javid: With respect, I do not think the hon. Gentleman has been listening to my responses. As I have said, and I repeat it again for his benefit, it is for property owners—local councils and, in some cases, housing associations—to determine what is essential, after taking the advice of their local fire and rescue service, the local experts. Once they take that advice, we will listen to their determination.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome the work my right hon. Friend has set out. He mentions the social housing review; should not that focus on our need for dramatically more social housing? Will he lobby the Treasury for tax incentives for housing associations, and will he liberalise planning rules so that we can build social housing for the 21st century?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that my right hon. Friend raises that point. He highlights the importance of social housing, which is a significant part of the total housing delivery in this country. That is why we want to provide more support for housing associations and ambitious councils that want to build more homes—one reason we recently announced the additional £2 billion. We listened to the sector when it said it wanted more certainty on rents from 2020 onwards, and we have provided that.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked about financial support through financial flexibilities, but I would be grateful if he specifically confirmed, or even agreed, that what he is referring to is a loan and that financial provision needs to increase because budgets have been cut. Charities have raised more than £24 million for the survivors of this horrific tragedy. How do they access that money, and how much of it has already been accessed?

Sajid Javid: First, on flexibilities, in some cases it may well be a loan. If a council’s housing revenue account borrowing limit is increased, that will be an additional loan, but in some cases councils have approached us to ask for a one-off authority to make a transfer from their general fund reserve—in that case, it will not be a loan.

I am glad that the hon. Lady highlights the charities. Charities raised more than £20 million of funding immediately after the tragedy, and they continue to raise money. I commend their work, which will really help the victims of this tragedy. More than half the money has been distributed so far. Of course, distribution is not a Government job—it is up to the charities—but the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has tried to co-ordinate for the charities so that they can work together to ensure that they help victims in the best way.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend and the Department for their granular approach to this tragedy—that seems the right approach. Finding the truth and identifying justice is crucial. Will he update the House on the progress on the inquiry?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises one of the most important issues following this tragedy: the need to seek the truth and justice for the survivors, their families and their friends. Of course, he will know that that work is rightly being led through an independent public inquiry—a judge-led inquiry—and that work has begun. It is not for me to comment on how it is progressing or on the final timing of it, but it is right that this has been set up. The judge will get the co-operation of everyone he needs it from, be it Government, my Department or others. The police work and the police inquiry are going on separately, and I expect the police to continue to give public updates on that.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): An Erdington tower block tenant asked me, “Will the Government pay to keep us safe?” The west midlands fire service has advised £41 million of works, including the retrofitting of sprinklers, but the city is reeling from £700 million of cuts to its budget. Will the Government pay to keep the tenants of Birmingham safe?

Sajid Javid: First, if the city had managed its public finances better, it might be in a better position. But when it comes to essential work, of course there should

1.[Official Report, 1 November 2017, Vol. 630, c. 1MC-2MC.]
be no shortcuts. Any support that it needs will be provided. I have talked about how that support can be provided and the type of work it needs to do. As I have said, and am happy to repeat, it is essential that the city take the advice of its local fire and rescue service, which it has done—that is important and it is good to see. We will look at that, but it is the legal owner of that building with a legal responsibility to keep it safe. Whatever it comes to us with and determines as essential, that is what we will listen to, and this is how we will work with it to help provide the flexibilities it needs.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please reassure me that the victims’ views will always be given paramountcy by the Government and that when making decisions about the recovery their views will be taken into account above all else?

Sajid Javid: I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that victims’ views come first, second and third.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State not recognise that escaping from a 20-floor tower block is exactly the same in Birmingham, Manchester and London, so leaving this to local decisions is not good enough? Local authorities will face having to replace panels and trying to retrofit sprinklers in a short period. I do not see that that is manageable out of a normal essential works budget.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises an important point about how this is about not just the funding, which I have talked about at the Dispatch Box a number of times, but capacity—the capacity to commission the work, and to make sure the replacement cladding, the scaffolding and all the essential bits and pieces are available. That is why one of the first things we did, working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, was to set up an industry response group, with representatives of industry across the UK, to make sure we are co-ordinating the availability of essential materials and capacity, including the specialist labour that will be necessary. As well as the funding, that is also a necessary part of this and we are very much involved in it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am chairman of the all-party group on local government, and along with other members of the group I have been following closely the responses of individual local authorities. I recognise that much hard work has been done to monitor the situation in social housing, but to reassure people up and down the country, will the Secretary of State confirm that his Department is monitoring the response of councils, particularly those facing financial problems and those perhaps with a lack of expertise within them?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I am happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. From day one, when we put the building safety programme in place, the number of people in my Department—the specialists—dealing with this has increased dramatically. One reason that has been necessary is that every building that has been identified—where, first, there had to be testing, and this was followed by the results of the testing, the interim measures and the remedial measures—has been allocated to an individual in my Department. So an individual has been following how the local authority, housing association or private sector operator has handled the testing and their response to the results of that testing. That has been necessary to make sure that all the necessary work takes place, and we will continue to do it for as long as is necessary.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of the social housing review, but will the Secretary of State please reconsider, as part of that review, my request of some weeks ago for an audit of all social housing? That would enable us to understand things such as the extent of concrete cancer and the percentage of homes with sprinklers, and therefore to best understand the scale of the problem and the investment that is needed, to which the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) perhaps alluded. That would be most welcome.

Sajid Javid: I will reconsider it.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): We must never forget the incredible work of the firefighters on that day. The fire and rescue service faced 30% cuts up to 2015, and local government settlements suggest there will be cuts of a further 20% before 2020. Meanwhile, firefighter pay has been capped at 1%. Is the Secretary of State at least having conversations with the Chancellor about a moratorium on fire and rescue cuts and about increasing firefighters’ pay?

Sajid Javid: The House cannot commend enough the work done by the fire service—not just what it did in response to this terrible tragedy, but its work in general up and down the country. With respect to the response to the tragedy, there is no evidence that there was a resource issue; however, it is correct that the ongoing independent inquiries are the ones properly to assess that, not us in this House. I direct the hon. Gentleman to the work that is being done through the independent review of not only building regulations, but fire safety rules and regulations. It is just the kind of thing that the review can look at.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Secretary of State has confirmed that it is for local authorities to seek expert advice in determining what work is essential to keep tower block residents safe. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) said, fire chiefs’ advice is unambiguous: the retrofitting of sprinklers cannot be optional or a “nice-to-have”; it is something that must happen. Why, then, did the Minister for Housing and Planning tell Nottingham City Council that sprinklers were “additional rather than essential”? Is he wrong?

Sajid Javid: We have asked Nottingham City Council for further information. What I have said generally for every council, whether it is Nottingham or others, is that it is for the council to determine what is genuinely essential, and that must be based on expert advice.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Lewisham Council has done all the safety checks and is doing all the remediation works to ensure that our blocks are
safe, and it doing that at great cost. The Government said that such work would be fully funded, yet no funding is forthcoming. Are the Government trying to bankrupt councils?

Sajid Javid: Lewisham Council is one of the number of councils I mentioned earlier that have contacted us. We are in more detailed discussions with a few of them, and we have asked for further information and are looking at it.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State doing to build public confidence among the people of Barton Hill, Kingsdown, Redcliffe, Hotwells and elsewhere in my constituency in the content, scrutiny and enforcement of fire and building safety regulations?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know about the work that has been going on with respect to publicly owned buildings, which include those owned by housing associations as well as by local councils; I have set that out previously and done so again today in detail. Like all other Members, she will have in her constituency private sector buildings, including the tall buildings above 18 metres, some of which we have tested if samples have come forward to us.

On 5 September, based on the expert advice that we had received, I wrote to the chief executive officer of every council to ask them to put in place a procedure to work out what other private buildings they have that would meet the criteria, to make sure that they are tested and to confirm for themselves that they are safe. I also took the opportunity to remind local council leaders and chief executives of the powers they already have under the Housing Act 2004 to take enforcement action, if they need to, on building regulations, if the work was recently done, as well as the powers that the fire and rescue services have under the fire safety order.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I remind the Secretary of State that the withdrawal of billions of pounds of revenue support grant from local authorities has been a unilateral decision of his Government since 2010. Therefore, placing that responsibility on local authorities in that light is beyond contempt. The residents of my 24 tower blocks in Gateshead really do express their deep sympathy for the occupants of Grenfell Tower, the bereaved and the traumatised, but they are also looking for peace of mind. Their buildings are not clad in the same way as Grenfell Tower, but they do live in blocks that have no sprinkler systems, and many of them in blocks with single stairwells. They have to live there whether they are elderly, infirm, disabled or vulnerable. They are looking for peace of mind from this Government and from this Secretary of State, and I am looking for it now.

Sajid Javid: In that case, the hon. Gentleman should be reassured that his council, like others, has received expert advice and has been asked to work with us in checking all buildings locally, whether they are in the public or the private sector. Where it needs further support and advice from us, those are available. It has also been reminded of the extensive enforcement powers.
Business of the House

11.15 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 23 October—Second Reading of the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill.

TUESDAY 24 October—Second Reading of the Smart Meters Bill.

WEDNESDAY 25 October—Opposition day (3rd allotted day). There will be a debate on social care followed by a debate on supported housing. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

THURSDAY 26 October—General debate on the implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 followed by general debate on global LGBT rights. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 27 October—The House will not be sitting.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 23, 26 and 30 October will be:

MONDAY 23 October—Debate on an e-petition relating to eligibility for mortgages.

THURSDAY 26 October—Debate on International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

MONDAY 30 October—Debate on an e-petition relating to proportional representation.

I am sure that the whole House will join me in marking national adoption week. The love and support offered by so many in this country to otherwise vulnerable children is to be celebrated.

Finally, the festival of lights, one of the happiest holidays, also begins today, signifying the victory of good over evil, knowledge over ignorance and light over darkness. May I take this opportunity to wish everyone a very happy Diwali?

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business—again, it is just for one week, not two—and also join her in wishing everybody peace and prosperity for Diwali. I also thank her for providing an advance copy, which I got via email on Tuesday, and the Vote Office in Portcullis House for having hard copies of it for Members on Monday.

This week, the sky darkened, a hurricane hit our islands, and the Government continued with their game playing both here and in Europe. I want to reiterate what you said after the motion yesterday, Mr Speaker, which was that

"the Leader of the House has to be the House's representative in the Government."—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 956.]

I am sure that the Deputy Leader of the House, who was in his place yesterday, will have informed the Leader of the House about the outcome. There were seven points of order following the debate. Member after Member—and you, Mr Speaker—wanted to know what the position is when the House votes 299-0. As the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said in her point of order, if the Government have retreated on certain aspects of a policy, the Minister should come to the House and explain.

This is where we make the law. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was right to say that this is not a school debating chamber. You made it very clear, Mr Speaker, that the Government should come to the House, because a motion was passed to pause the roll-out of universal credit. It took a week for them to end the charges on the helpline for universal credit. This is a disorganised Government who are disrespectful to the House. What do we say to the democracies around the world; to the UK Youth Parliament, who are coming here on 10 November; to young people as they learn about democracy; or to those who voted to get their sovereignty back? No wonder the EU negotiating team think the Government are amateurs. That is why they want to speak to the Opposition.

Could the Leader of the House please tell us how the Government will honour the result, as the Official Report put it:

"Resolved, That this House calls on the Government to pause...Universal Credit"—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 955.]

Is that really it for the business for next week: Monday, robot cars and Tuesday, smart meters? Are those the most pressing things for the House to debate? The shadow Secretary of State for Transport told me that the Government have accepted our amendments, so it is effectively our Bill.

The country is crying out for action—not calls for evidence—on housing, education, health, and the mounting debt caused by stagnant wages and increases in the cost of living, which we want to address in our Opposition days. But the Leader of the House must give the House a commitment today that non-urgent statements will not in future be used to disrupt Opposition days. I know the Government did not want to hear about people in rent arrears struggling to feed their families when they are in work, but that is the reality when Government policy is failing.

Mr Speaker, I want to draw your attention to another alarming situation. The Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill—a very serious Bill, to make provisions enabling sanctions to be imposed to comply with UN obligations “or other international obligations”: the EU cannot be mentioned at all on the face of the Bill—had its First Reading in the House of Lords yesterday, but the Bill will be printed today. That must be a first—where a Bill has passed its First Reading and no one has seen its contents until a day later. It should be one for the Foreign Secretary, but perhaps he cannot be trusted with the Bill. Worse still, the House of Commons cannot be trusted with the Bill. So will the Leader of the House please explain why that Bill started in the other place?

When will the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill come before the House for its Committee of the whole House stage? I read in an email yesterday that it will be after the November recess. Is that correct? Should we not be discussing it here? Will the Leader of the House please tell us what is happening?

May we have a statement on the growing scandal of the missing NHS files, as revealed in the Public Accounts Committee? There has been no response to the letter
from my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) on referrals for children with autism: 142 Members across the parties want to know why parents and children in a place like Stockton have waited nearly four years from the point of referral to specialist assessment. NICE guidelines say it takes three months. We are failing those children, some of whom are absolutely brilliant and see life in a different way from us.

Finally, it was great to attend the Women of the Year lunch last Monday with other hon. Members. The winners of the awards are truly deserving. The leadership award went to Dany Cotton, the first female commissioner of the London fire brigade, for her leadership in response to the Grenfell Tower fire. The international award went to the White Helmets, as a favoured charity of our dear colleague Jo Cox. It says:

“To save one life is to save all humanity.”

The main award went to the women of the emergency and medical services following the Manchester bombing—doctors, nurses, paramedics, the deputy chief constable and community police officers. I know the whole House will join me in acknowledging the work that those women have done in difficult times, as we all work towards a more equal society.

Andrea Leadsom: May I start by absolutely sharing in the hon. Lady’s praise for all those amazing women who won awards in the Women of the Year award ceremony this week? Our thanks and gratitude go to all those who contributed in the response to the appalling Grenfell Tower tragedy and those who rushed out to help after the Manchester bombing. I completely share her awe at what they have achieved.

The hon. Lady raises a number of issues. I will try to address them all but if she will forgive me; she spoke very fast—[Interruption.] I will try to get to all of them. She raised first the issue of the number of points of order last night in response to the Opposition day debate. She is aware that, as you said, Mr Speaker, the resolution of the House was passed, and that the Government are indeed not bound by that resolution, as you pointed out yourself. However, I assure all Members on both sides of the House that the Government are listening and have been listening. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said yesterday, and as was reiterated by the Prime Minister in Prime Minister’s questions, the DWP, as a result of issues raised in the House, has looked again at charges for those using the DWP helpline and has agreed that those charges should be stopped. That is direct action as a result of concerns raised across the House.

It is important—again, the Department for Work and Pensions has been listening carefully—that more is done to ensure that those claiming universal credit are aware that they can get up to 50% of the first month’s payments in the form of an emergency payment within seven days or even earlier. It is also important that many different efforts are being made by the DWP to work with landlords to ensure that those on universal credit do not get into difficult rent arrears. As colleagues will know, it is possible for rent to be paid directly to landlords, and that is now the case for many universal credit recipients.

So I assure colleagues that the House is absolutely being listened to, and the concerns being raised are acted on. I can also assure colleagues that DWP Ministers will come back to the House, as they have several times, to update it on progress in addressing the concerns raised by Members across the House. [HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] That will be as soon as there is more to tell the House about the achievements that have been put in place. It is very important that the Government show that we are listening and taking action. If hon. Members wished to be fair about it, they would accept that a great deal of progress has been made, and it is important that we continue with that.

The debate yesterday specifically called for a pause in the roll-out of universal credit. I can reassure hon. Members that the roll-out schedule already includes a number of pauses. There has recently been one; the next is scheduled for January. The roll-out of universal credit is being done over a lengthy period.

However, it is important that we go back to the origins of universal credit. Even the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on the Opposition Front Bench agrees that universal credit is a good move for those trying to get back into work. It consolidates six benefits into one. It provides more support for those trying to get into work. Three separate studies show that universal credit recipients get into work faster than jobseeker’s allowance recipients. Because of the simple taper rate, there are no hours rules and cliff edges, as there are with tax credits. And, of course, universal credit covers up to 85% of childcare costs, versus 70% with tax credits. All of those things are really important to support recipients to get into work, which is good for them and good for their families.

The hon. Member for Walsall South also raises the question of when the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will come to the House for its next stage, which will be Committee of the whole House. I want to reassure hon. Members that, as has been widely reported and as is well known, 300 amendments and 54 new clauses have been put forward. It should be reassuring to the House to know that the Government are looking carefully at those amendments and new clauses to ensure that, when the Bill does come back to this Chamber for a response and for the debate—we have eight days of debate, with eight protected hours on each day—the responses will be well thought through.

However, I would like to point out to Members on both sides of the House, who may not be aware of this, that there is nothing odd at all about a pause between Second Reading and Committee of the whole House. Specifically, with a constitutional measure such as the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, there were six sitting weeks between Second Reading and Committee of the whole House. With the Human Rights Act 1998, there were 10 sitting weeks between Second Reading and Committee of the whole House. With the Scottish Parliament (Constituencies) Act 2004, there were eight sitting weeks between Second Reading and Committee of the whole House. I hope that that reassures hon. Members that there is nothing odd or anything to fear from this slight pause. It is our clear, stated intent to show respect to the House by coming back to it with clear, considered responses to all the proposals made by hon. Members on both sides.
The hon. Lady asked why the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill has started in the other place. She will be aware that through discussion among the parties it is important that we schedule legislation appropriately between starting in the Lords or in the Commons. There is nothing odd about a Bill starting in the other place. This Bill was considered suitable for their lordships to consider with the level of expertise that they have. She will be aware that this week we have had the Second Reading of a Brexit Bill on nuclear safeguards, and further Brexit Bills will be introduced in this House and in the other House, as is perfectly normal parliamentary procedure.

The hon. Lady raised the length of time that it has taken for referrals of children and young people with autism. I share her concern about that issue, and I am happy to raise it specifically with the Secretary of State for Health—I know that he is concerned about it himself. I urge Members to seek appropriate methods, either through Health questions or through a debate, to raise this very serious issue further.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I put to my good friend the Leader of the House a Conservative long-term point of view about the events of last night? It may be that in future we have a minority Labour Government. They may produce a policy that we think is deeply contrary to our personal liberties. We may muster a majority in Parliament against it. What happens if that future Labour Government then say, “We’re sorry—you’ve set the precedent, this is only an expression of opinion, and we’re going to ignore Parliament”? Frankly, the road to tyranny is paved with Executives ignoring Parliament. I therefore urge my right hon. Friend to listen to Parliament. I believe that the Secretary of State should come and make a statement, and it should be a statement full of meat. Parliament does matter. If we, as Conservatives, live by the sword now, our Conservative values might die by the sword in future.

Andrea Leadsom: Can I assure my hon. Friend that there is no precedent being set here? The Government, like different parties and different Members, will look on a case-by-case basis at whether they will vote on specific motions or not. There is no precedent being set. I have just explained at some length that this Government are very clearly listening to Parliament and have very clearly taken action as a result of concerns raised in the House. I have also given an assurance that DWP Ministers will come back to this Chamber to update Members on progress with rolling out universal credit.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

Well, last night went well, didn’t it? What an anti-democratic shambles—an utter embarrassment for this House. Just when we thought this Government could not demonstrate more contempt for the democratic arrangements of the House, they have got into the lift and taken us down another couple of levels. I do not know what will be next. Maybe they will refuse to answer questions from the Dispatch Box. Maybe they will even try to abolish all these inconvenient voting Opposition parties. They might even do the country a favour and abolish themselves. The Leader of the House has to get a grip and the vacuous nonsense has to stop. She is the Leader of all of the House and she has to take that responsibility seriously. The first thing she needs to say is that she takes the view of the House seriously. We voted last night to pause the roll-out of universal credit, the Government have to accept it, and we have to hear that from a DWP Minister at the Dispatch Box.

What about the EU repeal Bill? The delay is not because of all the amendments the Leader of the House talks about—it is because the fractious Conservative party cannot agree a solid line on all this, and they are terrified of any possible defeat. That is why we are not seeing the repeal Bill. There is talk now that we might not even see it much before Christmas. We have to see it soon.

We are getting all this talk about a no-deal hard Brexit, and these guys are actually serious about putting forward this flavour of disaster. We need to have a debate to see how much it will cost. We know that Scotland and the north-east of England will be impacted the hardest by a no-deal hard Brexit, so can we have a debate on all this?

Lastly, can we have a statement on Catalonia, which is perhaps the biggest crisis we have seen in mainland Europe? There is talk today of suspending the national Parliament and of repression on the streets. When will we get a statement on that?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I could repeat all the points I have already made: I absolutely take my responsibilities seriously; I am, absolutely, Parliament’s representative in Government as well as Government’s representative in Parliament; and I am listening very carefully. As I have assured hon. Members, the Department for Work and Pensions has taken action as a direct result of points raised in this House by Members from across parties, and it will come back to this House to provide further updates on progress made as a direct result of points raised in this House.

The hon. Gentleman talks again about the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I think I have made the point very clearly that out of respect for this House, the Government are doing justice to the very significant concerns that have been raised about procedures and policy in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, and it will come back to the House just as soon as the Government are prepared to do justice to the new clauses and amendments that have been tabled by Members. In addition, it is absolutely normal practice in this House to have a pause between Second Reading and Committee of the whole House, particularly on large constitutional Bills, to make sure that we are able properly to consider all the points raised.

The hon. Gentleman also raises the significant and very concerning matter of the Catalonian situation. He is right to do so, and I say again that we have all been very concerned and dismayed to see the violence on the streets in Spain. However, Spain is a very key ally of the UK, and we do urge all parties to ensure that any actions taken are constitutional and legally justifiable.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On rare occasions, I have been in trouble with the Whips for not voting for Government policy. Yesterday would have
been the first time that had I voted for Government policy, I would have been in trouble. We cannot ignore the will of the House. This is about not just Opposition days, but Back-Bench business days—and what if a motion put forward by the Government is lost, because the Government ignore it?

The fact is that we have to have a mechanism whereby the Government formally come back and explain what action they are going to take as a result of a vote in this House. May I suggest to the Leader of the House that she considers that proposal this week, and that she comes back next week and says that that is exactly what is going to happen? Will she tell us that within 12 weeks of a vote, a Minister—perhaps even the Leader of the House—will come back and explain what action has been taken? [Interruption.] I said within 12 weeks. [Interruption.] Oh, tsk—stop! That could perhaps be called the Leadsom convention.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised that perfectly reasonable suggestion on a number of occasions. As I have made clear, it is the intention of DWP Ministers to come back to this place to update the House on progress frequently and, I am sure, certainly within the timeframe that he mentions. I think it is very important to be clear on this: this is not some new precedent. On the universal credit issue yesterday, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions came to this House and responded very fully to points and concerns raised by this House. It is perfectly right that the House continues to raise issues and that Departments continue to respond to them.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business announcement for next week, and for confirming the two Back-Bench business debates on Thursday 26 October on the implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and on global LGBT rights. May I, however, entreat her once again to give us some notice of future Back-Bench time? We received eight applications from right hon. and hon. Members on Tuesday this week, but we were unable to confirm to them that we had any debating time in the Chamber to allocate to them. It may be difficult at the moment for the Government to know what they want to do in their own time, but surely they could let the Backbench Business Committee know in a timely way what time they intend to allocate to us.

I am very privileged to say that I was re-elected as chair of the all-party group on housing in the north last night, when we received representations from a number of chief executives of housing companies in the north of England. I am afraid to say that the message from them is that housing arrears are building in universal credit roll-out areas. In the discussion earlier, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government told us that local authorities have a responsibility to retrofit sprinklers and undertake safety work, but if they have major problems with their housing revenue accounts and are at the borrowing cap, it is very difficult for them to do so. Some reality needs to kick in here.

I have one last point. I do not know if it is just me, but my mobile phone does not seem to be working as well in this building as it has done in the past. I am wondering whether the scaffolding now cladding many parts of the building is acting as a Faraday cage for mobile phone signals. If that is the case, we need to do something about it so that Members can communicate with one another and with their constituents.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his points. On Back-Bench days, as I said last week, we will always seek to give him as much notice as we possibly can. He will appreciate that there is a lot of new legislation—we are still in the early days of this new parliamentary term—and we need to get started with a number of competing priorities. He will appreciate that we will give him as much notice as we possibly can, and I was delighted that we were able to protect time last week for some of his important debates. We will continue always to listen and to seek to address any specific concerns he has.

On social landlords, as I mentioned earlier, it is possible to have direct payments to landlords from universal credit recipients: 34% of social sector tenants on universal credit now have such an arrangement. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to make sure that landlords are aware of that facility. I know that Ministers have taken away that point from yesterday’s debate and will look at it carefully again.

On the hon. Gentleman’s third point, I had not previously heard about mobile phone problems. I am pleased to say that my mobile phone still seems to be working, but I certainly understand that there may be some problems relating to the scaffolding and I will look into the matter.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on encouraging people with learning difficulties to get involved with the performing arts? On Sunday, at the London Palladium, the Countess of Wessex, the chairman of the Royal Mencap Society, Mr Derek Lewis, and many parliamentarians witnessed an absolutely inspiring performance by the Music Man Project.

Andrea Leadsom: I regret, in that case, that I was not invited. The Government aim to ensure that Britain is one of the world’s most creative and exciting places to live. As part of this, we are absolutely committed to ensuring access and equality within the performing arts, and of course to making sure that creative professions are accessible to talented individuals irrespective of their background. I thoroughly welcome my hon. Friend’s question, and I will look to find time for such a debate.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House seen the very worrying series of openDemocracy reports this week on the role of dark money in the EU referendum, including revelations of illegal donations to the Democratic Unionist party and new questions today over the real wealth of Arron Banks, the main financial backer of Leave.EU? Given the widespread public concern about foreign, particularly Russian, interference in western democracies, will she assure the House that the Government and the Electoral Commission will examine these reports very carefully, and reassure our country that all the resources spent during the referendum were from permissible sources?
Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point. Of course, any specific information should always be raised with the Electoral Commission to ensure that any wrongdoing is caught, and I absolutely share his concern that we need to make sure that all donations are indeed permissible and legal.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Last week, I was delighted to host an event in Parliament to highlight the issues of familial hypercholesterolemia, or FH—a genetic disorder. I also ran the marathon this year in support of Cardiac Risk in the Young, which promotes heart screening. Some 1,300 young people in Eastleigh have been screened in memory of Claire Reed. Ensuring that those young people with risks are screened saves countless lives. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in this Chamber on heart screenings?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on that marathon; I remember her absolute exhaustion the following day, and we were all in awe of her achievement. She raises an incredibly important point about how screening, particularly for heart issues, can save lives. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate on that very important matter.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am enormously grateful to the Leader of the House for her personal support for my private Member’s Bill, which we will be debating tomorrow. I wonder whether she could do something else to help. As things stand, if Second Reading goes through tomorrow, as I hope it will—many Members had their photograph taken yesterday in support of the Bill—and even if we get it through Committee in a couple of weeks, it will not reach remaining stages until the end of April. That is a long time. If the Government wanted to—if it had a gap in the legislative programme, perhaps—it could decide to adopt the Bill and give it Government time on the Floor of the House before Christmas, so that we could get it on the statute book.

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman is being so charming and persuasive, I absolutely assure him that the Government are behind his Bill. It is entirely right that we should protect emergency workers from abuse and violence and completely wrong that they should be attacked by people whom they seek to help. I assure him that we will make our best efforts to bring forward his Bill as soon as we can.

Mark Paysey (Rugby) (Con): On yesterday’s debate and debates more generally, my observation is that there is often very little time for Ministers to respond to the many points raised by Members. Many Members spoke yesterday, but the Minister had only 10 minutes to respond. Will the Leader of the House consider making more time available for Ministers to respond?

Andrea Leadsom: I am happy to ask the Leader of the House to give it more time when it finally turns up in this House to be debated.

I wanted to ask the Leader of the House a specific question. Mr Speaker, I know that you recognise the important work done by the Intelligence and Security Committee. Given the serious terrorist incidents that we have seen this year and the fact that the Committee, as I understand it, has not met since April, will the right hon. Lady explain when she expects it to be established and when it will start its important work?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue. The Committee will be established just as soon as it can be. It requires that names be put forward from both sides of the House, and there are particular screening procedures and so on. I assure the hon. Gentleman that it will be re-established as soon as possible.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital for Members to able to raise their concerns, both local and national, about the ongoing defence review? Will she agree to hold a debate on the issue, which could have huge implications for my constituency if the future of RM Condor and 45 Commando is not clarified?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important point not just for her constituency, but for the country. I can tell her that in July the Government initiated a national security capability review—the NSCR—which will ensure that the UK’s investment in national security capabilities is joined up, effective and efficient. It is being led by the National Security Adviser. The Ministry of Defence, the Home Office and our security services will make a full contribution to that review. She may like to know that there is a Westminster Hall debate this afternoon. She may wish to take part in it.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House go back to Department for Work and Pensions Ministers and tell them it is no good them coming to the House at some point in the future? They should be here on Monday and they should be saying to people what they are going to do about the will of Parliament, as expressed in yesterday’s vote. We already have universal credit in my constituency. The latest figures from Gedling Homes show that 92% of its tenants on universal credit are in arrears. That is not an accident, but a direct consequence of Government policy. It is a new Poor Law and we need to do something about it now.
Andrea Leadsom: As I have said to a number of hon. Members, the Department for Work and Pensions has heard the concerns of this House. The Minister has specifically said that he will look more closely at the issue of rent arrears. A number of those rent arrears are rolled over from the previous system, and are not as a direct result of universal credit. Let us be clear: universal credit is designed to help people to get back into work. It consolidates six complex benefits into one. It provides more support, more encouragement, more ability for people to increase their hours and not lose their benefits, and more support for childcare. It is designed to help people into work and it is succeeding.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I just received a letter this morning from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) stating that the A12 upgrade is to be delayed. This is an extremely significant piece of infrastructure in East Anglia. For my constituents, it is probably their most important road. I am obviously very concerned to hear this news, but I received the letter 17 minutes after Transport questions. Given that I did not have the chance to raise the issue then, will my right hon. Friend consider a debate on road infrastructure? I am sure that many other colleagues would like to consider the significance of such issues.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry that my hon. Friend just missed Transport questions and I can quite understand his frustration. He will be aware that billions of pounds of new road programmes are being introduced, including £2.3 billion on a new housing infrastructure fund to ensure we can provide more roads that facilitate housing development. I would be very happy to take up his specific point with the Department for Transport. I am also sure that Transport Ministers will be keen to hear from him.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): While I am sure the answer was given in good faith, the answer the Leader of the House gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) is untrue. The Electoral Commission has confessed that it has no mechanisms to find out whether there has been interference by cyber-techniques from Russia, by botnets and by artificial intelligence. These methods of distorting and buying votes, buying and selling votes, are best served by sticking with the Government in their determination to seek an all-encompassing agreement on free trade and other matters of co-operation with our EU friends and neighbours that will be to their benefit and certainly to the UK’s benefit. Unfortunately, his position is that we should seek to subvert the will of the people as expressed in last year’s referendum. As I understand it, the position of the official Opposition and the SNP is that we should accept whatever the EU offers, which clearly would not be to the advantage of the UK people. Britain’s interests are best served by sticking with the Government in their determination to seek a sound and comprehensive agreement with our EU friends and neighbours.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is well aware that the Government’s clear position is of seeking an all-encompassing agreement on free trade and other matters of co-operation with our EU friends and neighbours that will be to their benefit and certainly to the UK’s benefit.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although winter is coming, one freeze that millions of hard-working people want maintained is the fuel duty freeze? Is she aware of the campaign by FairFuelUK and many MPs not just to keep the freeze, but to stop taxes on diesel car owners? Will she make a statement on what the Government are doing to help hard-pressed motorists?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has been a real champion for drivers and has been extremely successful in his bid, in that over seven long years this Government have rejected the fuel duty increases that the last Labour Government proposed should occur automatically each year. Car drivers are now significantly better off as a result of lower fuel taxes. I suggest, however, that he makes his submission to the Chancellor in time for the Budget.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): As several Members have pointed out, there is rather a large gap in the Government’s legislative programme. I am sure that the Leader of the House would like to fill it, for instance with a debate on the £400 million needed for St Helier hospital or on the funding that Sutton’s schools lack. However, I would like to support the bid by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for a debate on no deal and its impact. Such a debate would enable Brexit supporters on the Conservative Benches to talk in advance to the businesses that would be crippled by no deal, to the communities on the border in Northern Ireland that are worried about the security considerations, and to EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU for whom no deal would be a disaster. Who knows, perhaps some of those Brexit supporters might even change their minds by the end of the debate.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is a great champion of his constituency. I have had the pleasure of visiting him there twice, including to open an offshore wind farm, which I know has brought growth to his area. He is absolutely right to raise the importance of focusing on specific issues facing coastal towns, and I am sure he will be keen to seek a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate specifically to discuss the interests of his constituency.
Graeme Morris (Easington) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate on the role of the voluntary sector? I received a report today of a lady in my constituency who had had to sell her child’s pushchair so that she could pay her electricity bill. Organisations such as the East Durham Trust in my constituency are a vital safety net for the most vulnerable, but they are running low on food bank donations. The trust is crowdfunding online through its website, www.eastdurhamtrust.org.uk, for a “people’s takeaway” so that children in my constituency do not go cold and hungry owing to the roll-out of universal credit. What will the Leader of the House do to support organisations such as the East Durham Trust that are struggling to meet the growing demand of services caused by the Government’s failures, such as the roll-out of universal credit?

Andrea Leadsom: The valuable work done by charities and the voluntary sector that the hon. Gentleman talks about is appreciated throughout the House—it is certainly appreciated by many of our constituents. He may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate. Let me point out, however, that under this Government the number of children living in workless families has dropped by almost 1 million households, which is absolutely vital. Progress is being made. Employment is the highest that it has ever been, and universal credit is designed to help people to get into work. It is incredibly important for us to continue to pursue policies that help people to enjoy the security of a pay packet that benefits them and their families.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Prime Minister be making a statement to the House on Monday about this weekend’s EU summit, and what other Government statements will be made next week?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will know that statements are announced on the day by the usual methods. It is a convention that the Prime Minister comes to the Chamber to make a statement on European Councils and I am sure that she plans to do so as normal.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the Members who secured the Back-Bench debate on global LGBT rights that will take place next week. The Government have an appalling record on the detention and deportation of LGBT asylum seekers. Will the Leader of the House confirm that a Home Office Minister will respond to that debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that all Members recognise that the Government have done an enormous amount to promote LGBT rights, including by introducing same-sex marriage. The hon. and learned Lady may well wish to raise her specific point during Home Office questions, but I think we can all celebrate the huge achievements that have been made in this country in addressing discrimination against LGBT people, and doing as much as possible to ensure that they have equal access to every aspect of our daily life.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): May I join my right hon. Friend in wishing Shubh Deepawali to Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists not only in this country, but throughout the world? I apologise in advance to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) as I will not be able to support his excellent Bill tomorrow. That is not because I do not agree with it—I do—but because I shall be visiting no fewer than nine temples in my constituency and others to celebrate the Hindu new year.

May I invite Members who were not able to attend the Diwali reception that we held on the Terrace yesterday to join us at our seminar on Monday night? It will provide an excellent opportunity for Members in all parts of the House to understand the true meaning of this great festival.

Andrea Leadsom: I join my hon. Friend in celebrating this wonderful festival. I agree that it is important for us all to understand its purpose and origin, and, again, I wish all Members a very happy Diwali.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Following this week’s announcement on sentencing for dangerous driving, will the Leader of the House consider providing time for a debate on enforcement? My constituency is experiencing serious problems with dangerous and erratic driving, and it is only a matter of time before that leads to serious injury or even death. The West Yorkshire police force has lost nearly 40% of its traffic officers in the last five years. What use are new laws if they cannot be enforced?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important issue that matters a great deal to Members on both sides of the House, which is why we have decided to address concerns about dangerous driving. Enforcement is, of course, absolutely key. I commend the amazing work of our police forces in enforcing all our laws, and this law will be no different in that respect.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Leader of the House draw the attention of all relevant Ministers a very important ten-minute rule Bill that will be introduced on Wednesday week by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon)? It proposes the introduction of a statute of limitations to prevent the persecution, through legal process and the courts, of veterans for events that occurred in Northern Ireland up to 40 years ago.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is very consistent in supporting the protection of those who were involved in events that happened long ago and are still under investigation today. I absolutely assure him that the Government are unstinting in our admiration for the role our armed forces played in ensuring that Northern Ireland’s future would only ever be decided by democracy and consent.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): This week I attended a Government roundtable on ending gang violence and exploitation. The necessity that Government Departments developed a joined-up approach and share data to tackle the root causes was absolutely evident, so may we have a debate in Government time on how Departments can work together to tackle this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important matter, and I encourage her to find a way to ensure that a debate on it is held in this place, perhaps through the Backbench Business Committee. The Government take
this matter incredibly seriously, and she will be aware that the Home Office is taking steps both on prevention and education, as well as on stamping out this kind of violence.

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): May we have a statement from the Leader of the House on modern democracy? Our constituents send us here to represent them and to hold the Government to account by voting in this place. What message does it send to our constituents when the Government feel that they can ignore the will of this House?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I say again that the Government are by no means doing as the hon. Lady suggests. We are listening. I have been absolutely clear since coming into this role that the Government are determined to listen to views from right across the House. That is evidenced by the work of the Department for Work and Pensions and yesterday’s statement, and, following yesterday’s debate, by our doing more to help those applying for universal credit, which Members across the House agree is there to help and support people, and which is succeeding in getting more people into work.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Government guarantee the mineworkers pension scheme, but 50% of the surplus goes back into Government pockets. They have had a £3 billion windfall. Mineworkers and their families want a better deal for their years of toil at the coalface. May we have a Treasury statement so that my uncle Desi, my uncle Jackie and their comrades get their fair share?

**Andrea Leadsom**: We all agree that the work done by coalminers over so many years to keep the lights on did a huge service to this country. The hon. Gentleman might well wish to raise this issue at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions, or through an Adjournment debate.

**Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Earlier this month I had the honour of accompanying my local police force on a Friday evening shift. I was appalled by the lack of respect for our officers, so I applaud, as I am sure the whole House does, the efforts of my hon. Friends the Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) in this area, and support the Bill that we will consider tomorrow. However, important though that is—it is truly vital—I was horrified to learn that a third fewer warranted officers are now on shift on Friday nights than was the case 10 years ago, so they are completely overstretched. May we have a debate in Government time about the number of warranted officers serving in our forces? We have lost 501 in the past eight years.

**Andrea Leadsom**: I reiterate that I share the hon. Lady’s support for the private Member’s Bill of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I look forward to it receiving its Second Reading tomorrow.

I understand that the hon. Lady’s police force is achieving significant progress in the fight against crime. It is performing exceedingly well, for which I congratulate it. However, as she will no doubt be aware, the proportion of officers in frontline roles has increased to over 93% from an estimated 91% in 2010, and police budgets are being protected.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab (Co-op)): More than 900 of my constituents are being placed on universal credit from 1 November, so will the Leader of the House explain how I can reassure them, given that we have no date in the diary for the Department for Work and Pensions to come and talk to us, that they are not being used as guinea pigs?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I can absolutely give the hon. Lady an assurance. As I have said several times today, universal credit is designed to help those looking for work. According to three independent studies, it has resulted in many more people finding work than was the case under jobseeker’s allowance. It is improving opportunities to get jobs, it enables people to keep more of the benefit as they increase their hours, and it helps much more with childcare costs.

In accordance with the DWP’s statement to the House yesterday, the scheme is also being improved so that the costs of calls to the helpline will be waived, and more instruction will be given to jobcentre officials to ensure that people know that they can get up-front emergency payments. The Department has taken away a list to consider and Ministers have assured me that they will come back with further updates as soon as they have more to tell the House about progress on addressing those issues.

The House called for a pause and the Department has been clear that it has just had one to ensure that it can update and upgrade systems. It plans another in January. Members should therefore be reassured that the Government are listening carefully and acting on the points that Members raised.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am gravely concerned about the chaos in Walton prison in my constituency. It had a snap inspection, and received one out of five, the worst possible score. The governor was removed last week and the NHS trust that provided healthcare at the site has today pulled out of its contract. The mayor of Liverpool and I have learned all that through the media, with no contact from Ministers or the Prison Service. I wrote to the Minister for Prisons and Probation on Monday and I am waiting for a reply. Will the Leader of the House advise me on the breakdown in communication between the Government, the Prison Service and local representatives? Can we at least have a debate or statement on health, safety and welfare across our prisons network? What more can I do to get answers about Walton prison?

**Andrea Leadsom**: That sounds like a very concerning issue and the hon. Gentleman is right to be worried about it. I understand that the Secretary of State for Justice will meet the chief inspector of prisons today to discuss the specific issue and I am certainly happy to raise the matter with the Secretary of State after business questions.

However, the hon. Gentleman will know that we are putting an extra £100 million a year into the frontline to recruit 2,500 more prison officers by the end of 2018 and investing £1.3 billion in a modern, fit-for-purpose...
prison estate, with up to 10,000 new modern prison places during this Parliament. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue and I will happily take up the specifics with the Secretary of State.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It was not just Opposition Members voting against universal credit yesterday who defeated the Government, but the will of the people at the general election, which decreed that the Conservative party does not have an overall majority in the House. The Government have bunged some money to the Democratic Unionist party and they think that that gives them the right to behave as if they have an overall majority, but they do not. We need from the Leader of the House—our representative in the Cabinet—a statement about what she will do to ensure that the minority Government respect and act upon the House’s decisions.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman needs to ask himself why, if the Conservative party has no right to govern, we are sitting on this side of the House. The Conservatives won 56 seats more than the nearest party to us, and we are governing under well-established rules through a confidence and supply agreement.

The hon. Gentleman again raises the issue of money going to the Democratic Unionist party, but that is not the case. There is further investment for the restored Northern Ireland Executive, but to be clear, according to the latest figures, only £232 per person has been spent in recent years in Northern Ireland on transport, compared with £504 in Scotland. It is right to provide the money that goes to Northern Ireland for city deals and to promote health and infrastructure. The Government have provided many billions of pounds for city deals in other parts of the United Kingdom, so there is nothing strange about that.

As I have said time and again, the Government are determined to listen to colleagues from all parties. We continually revert to the fact that the Opposition are determined to talk about process rather than the serious policy challenges that face our country on which the Government are determined to make progress.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your wise words last night about the huge number of points of order that were made. Unfortunately they have fallen on deaf ears. The Government showed disrespect not only to Parliament but to my constituents, who continue to suffer day in, day out, under the ill-thought-out universal credit scheme.

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that the universal credit programme has received approval across the House because it is helping more people into work. It enables people to keep more of their benefits as they increase their hours and it helps with childcare costs. It is intended to help people. The Department has made it clear that it has listened to points from hon. Members of all parties about implementation, and it is taking action, such as getting rid of call charges to the universal credit helpline and ensuring that people know that they can get emergency payments up front. Evidence shows that the scheme helps people to get into work and gives them the security of a pay packet that benefits them and their families.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): There is no pause in Scunthorpe, where universal credit is being rolled out this week. Local partners, whether Ongo, the social housing provider, private landlords or the citizens advice bureau are genuinely concerned that what my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) described—an increase in arrears and evictions—will happen locally. What would the Leader of the House say to my constituents, who hear that the House has said so clearly that there should be a pause, when nothing then happens?

Andrea Leadsom: I would say to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents that the Department for Work and Pensions has listened to the House and acted straight away. There has just been a pause, and that is why the Department could take action quickly to improve the roll-out of universal credit. A further pause is planned for January, and DWP Ministers will come back to the House to provide further updates in due course. The hon. Gentleman’s constituents should therefore be reassured that this benefit, which is designed to help them get back into work, will be improved as much as possible.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is not just universal credit that causes people untold misery. I have a constituent, Mr McMaster, who, when he transferred to a personal independence payment from a lifetime’s enhanced disability living allowance award, was given only four points and lost his benefits. The stress that that caused meant that his marriage suffered, he tried to commit suicide and he nearly lost his house and car. Out of sheer desperation, he reapplied for PIP, using the same evidence that had been presented previously. Luckily, the right decision was made and he was given an enhanced award in both categories. Will the Leader of the House make a statement outlining what the Government will do to review that iniquitous system, and will she apologise to my constituent?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that case. As constituency MPs, we all have examples of where we are not happy with interpretation or with the assessment of individuals, and it is right to raise such cases. I am pleased to hear that his constituent has had a good result, and I commend him for taking up that case. However, it is important from a policy point of view that proper systems are in place to assess those who receive disability benefits, that that is fair and is seen to be fair and that there is an appropriate appeal process, in addition to support from MPs, when we feel that the outcome is in doubt.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The trade unions from BAE Systems at Brough are visiting Parliament this week to talk to MPs about potential job losses, and 140 MPs from both sides of the House have signed a letter asking the Government to think again about the in-service date of the Red Arrows Hawks, many of which were built in the 1970s. Is it therefore not time for a statement about securing those jobs and, more importantly, our sovereign capability?
Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady’s enthusiasm for the Red Arrows, which are beloved in this country and do a fantastic job. To be clear, there is no requirement to replace the Red Arrows Hawk T1. We have a large fleet of around 75 aircraft from which the Red Arrows display team can draw. There has been no reduction in Red Arrows flying hours, and it is incorrect to suggest, as some have, that numbers have been reduced at displays. The Government have helped to secure orders for Hawk aircraft from Qatar, securing production for next year, and we are pressing hard for further export deals. There is no need for an early replacement for the Red Arrows as a decision is not needed until at least the end of this Parliament.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): May we have a statement detailing the Government’s expectations for lifeboat provision? There is considerable concern in Ceredigion that proposals under the recent coastal review of Cardigan bay would leave the entire Ceredigion coastline without sufficient all-weather lifeboat provision.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I encourage him to go direct to the Department for Transport. If it is aware of the situation, it will be equally concerned. If he would like to write to me, I am happy to raise the matter on his behalf.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Over the past three months, I have attended the opening of four pensioner lunch clubs. The common theme coming from the groups, which are mainly run by volunteers, is that pensioners are lonely and are struggling to feed and cook for themselves. The clubs are trying to help to build community cohesion. Will the Leader of the House find space in Government time for a debate on loneliness and its impact? It would allow colleagues on both sides of the House to highlight the excellent work of the commission on loneliness set up in the name of our former colleague Jo Cox.

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness for its excellent work. I have taken part in some of its presentations in the Speaker’s apartments, and I congratulate you on raising awareness, Mr Speaker. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that loneliness among the elderly is a serious concern, and I have initiatives in my constituency to try to bring people together more frequently so that communities can work together to try to alleviate loneliness. I am happy to support any proposal that he wants to make to highlight that issue further. I would add, however, that I am proud of this Government’s efforts to ensure that pensioners are now much better off than they were when we came into government in 2010 and to protect pensions and the pensioners’ uplift, which has been incredibly important for those on low fixed incomes.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): My constituent Mrs Withers has been caring for her diabetic grandson since 13 August. She has thus far received no financial support due to non-co-operation from the child’s mother, who has been given until November to respond to requests to transfer benefits to the grandmother. May we have a debate in Government time about the financial support available for those who take on emergency childcare arrangements and about ensuring that guidelines and payments are consistent throughout the country?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about what is obviously a difficult situation, which the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise. I encourage him to speak directly to the Department for Work and Pensions, which I urge to take up this specific issue.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Leader of the House says that the Government are listening, but the only thing they did yesterday was scrap helpline charges. It frankly beggars belief that it takes an Opposition day debate for the Government to decide that 55p a minute is too much to charge cash-strapped people to call the very Department that is making them cash-strapped. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions kept recommending yesterday that claimants visit their local jobcentre, but at the same time the Department is shutting nearly 70 jobcentres across the country. Sheffield’s Eastern Avenue jobcentre is due to close on 17 November, but the Department is yet to publish a cost-benefit analysis for the decision despite claiming that it is based solely on the need to make savings. I am yet to be convinced that the Department has even conducted such an analysis, so can we have a debate in Government time on that decision before the jobcentre is closed, causing misery for claimants in the area?

Andrea Leadsom: I gently say to the hon. Lady that she cannot have it both ways. She cannot complain that the Government are not listening to the House and then say that it is not right that the Government should act on the views of this House, rather than independently. That seems a little back to front. On universal credit, the key point is that the Department for Work and Pensions is responding both to its own pauses and its experiences of the roll-out of universal credit to date and to the representations of Members from right across the House. The Government are determined to make universal credit a huge success and to deal with implementation issues as they arise. I assure Members that that is the case.

As for jobcentre closures specifically, the hon. Lady will be aware that we still have a significant fiscal challenge as a result of the state of the economy that we were left with in 2010. We continue to try to take steps to live within our means. I know that Opposition Members do not understand this, but the reality is that every day we continue to spend more than we receive in taxes means another day of debt for which our children and grandchildren will be forced to pay, so we need to live within our means. The reduction in jobcentres is actually being offset by an increase in the number of work coaches, who will provide more support to people who need it. We are merging a number of smaller offices into bigger sites, so that we can save the taxpayer money, but we are not changing the service we offer. Wherever possible, we are improving that service for those who are looking for work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On Tuesday, Muhammad Safdar made several discriminatory comments in the National Assembly of Pakistan against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community of Pakistan. He accused the faith group of being untrustworthy and a threat to
Pakistan, arguing that it should be banned from the armed forces. Coming from the son-in-law of a former Prime Minister, such comments are dangerous and will surely fuel prejudice towards the already persecuted Ahmadiyya Muslim community. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on that pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a significant issue. I absolutely encourage him to raise it directly with the Foreign Office, which will no doubt have further information to share with him on the steps that the UK Government can take.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Linked to universal credit is the whole question of funding, including for women’s shelters, for example, and nursery provision. Can we have statement on that?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a separate issue about support for women who are suffering from domestic violence, and I assure him that—[Interruption.] Am I misunderstanding his question?

Mr Cunningham: My point is that the two are linked, but if the Leader of the House wants to talk about it separately, the issue is about funding for women’s shelters, which has been badly cut.

Andrea Leadsom: Then I think I did understand the hon. Gentleman correctly. He raises an incredibly important point about protection for women who are experiencing domestic violence, and DWP Ministers took away some action points from yesterday’s debate to look more at ensuring that women who need protection from abusive partners are receiving it. More broadly, the hon. Gentleman should welcome, as we all do, the Government’s bringing forward of new measures to try to protect people from domestic violence and other domestic abuse, which is so appalling and unacceptable in this country.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the British citizen youth awards? The awards are being granted today to celebrate young people from across the country, including my constituent Grace Warnock.

Will the Leader of the House also provide a statement on how her discussions are going on topical questions on devolved matters?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to congratulate Grace. The hon. Gentleman did not say what she is receiving her award for, but the House congratulates her.

The question about the time allotted for topical questions on devolved matters comes up from time to time, and we regularly review it. Obviously there is sometimes a challenge that questions on UK issues would be appropriate for other Departments, rather than just the territorial offices. There is always a balance to be struck in ensuring that questions go to the Departments that are best able to give the appropriate answer.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On Monday we had the incredibly disappointing news of 400 redundancies at Vauxhall, and I was grateful for the opportunity to raise it on the Floor of the House that day through an urgent question. I will return to the issue of the plant’s future in the coming weeks and months, but there was also other news on jobs that day in the form of a constituency-by-constituency report on the effects of automation. The report predicted that around 30% of jobs in my constituency will be lost to automation in the next 10 to 15 years, and the figure is higher in other constituencies. I just do not think the Government have a strategy or plan to deal with that impending challenge, so can we please have a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the very concerning issue of job losses at Vauxhall, and he has done so again today. He will be aware that the Government are doing everything possible to ensure that those who lose their job are helped into work elsewhere. I am sure he would join all Members of the House in celebrating the fact that there are over 3 million more people in work than in 2010, that there are more than 3 million apprenticeships for young people and that there are almost 1 million fewer workless households with children than in 2010. Those are all things to celebrate and, as it kicks in, automation should enable us to transform jobs into the skilled jobs of the future, which is why I am delighted that the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill has its Second Reading next week. The Bill will create more high-technology, skilled work in this country.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): When I arrived in the House a few months ago I knew that democracy was not necessarily the most efficient process, but last night I realised just how dysfunctional it is at present. It was the fourth time that the Government have been defeated on a substantive issue. We are obviously spending a significant amount of valuable time on such issues, so we should be heard. We should have received a statement from the Government last night. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Government hear our views?

Andrea Leadsom: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the House’s views are being heard by the Government. As I have said throughout today’s business questions, the Department for Work and Pensions has heard not just the issues raised in yesterday’s debate on universal credit but what Members on both sides of the House have said in recent weeks. The DWP has not just heard but has taken action. The business discussed in this House is always heard by the Government, who take careful action on it. I assure him that that will continue.
Points of Order

12.34 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) mentioned the sad passing away of Sir Teddy Taylor. I also bring to your attention the sad passing away over the summer of the former MP for Keighley, Mr Gary Waller. I mention it because he was president of the Harlow Conservative Association for a number of years, and he was also a councillor for Sheering, a village in my constituency. He was incredibly active.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which gives me an opportunity to respond sympathetically. Sir Teddy Taylor was very well known to me, and he offered me much encouragement in the early years when I was contemplating the possibility of a political career. I remember Sir Teddy coming to speak at Essex University in, if memory serves me correctly, January 1984. Although it was 33 years ago, I remember it as keenly as if it was yesterday. I have written to Sheila to offer my condolences. Much was said yesterday about Sir Teddy that was fully merited.

Gary Waller I also knew, although much less well. I heard about his passing over the summer, not least from his ex-wife. He was very well known, and he was a very cultured individual. I think it entirely fitting and his ex-wife. He was very well known, and he was a very cultured individual. I think it entirely fitting and characteristicly gracious that the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) has recorded his respects in this way.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any notification from the Government on whether they intend to make a statement on the military campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria? I am sure you will be aware of the widespread and authoritative media reports showing that Raqqa has fallen and that Daesh has been evicted. Given that the Government asked for and got specific authorisation from this House to deploy UK armed forces in that theatre of war, I would expect them to come forward as soon as possible with an update on what is happening.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am aware and other colleagues will be conscious of his long-standing interest in these matters. That interest, incidentally, will be very widely shared by other colleagues. I have received no indication from any colleague in the Treasury Bench will have heard, or will shortly hear of, his point of order. It is perfectly open to Ministers to volunteer to come to the House next week to make a statement.

Alternatively, and possibly as an attempted insurance policy, it is open to the hon. Gentleman to seek other means by which to secure the presence of a Minister. If I may very gently say so, Members undertaking such initiatives can benefit from the advice I am about to proffer, which is that such submissions should be detailed and comprehensive. When such written submissions are detailed and comprehensive in initiating, developing and concluding a compelling argument for the presence of a Minister, they have a greater prospect of success.

Backbench Business

Tobacco Control Plan

12.38 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government’s publication of the new Tobacco control plan.

I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this very important debate. I also welcome the Minister to his new post in the Department of Health, and I am sure he will hear much more about this issue in the months to come.

I have no financial interest, but I should mention that I am an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, as it is heavily involved in the debate on tobacco.

I have repeatedly called in this House for the publication of a comprehensive tobacco control plan to replace the Government’s previous plan, “Smoking Still Kills,” which expired in 2015. I welcome the Government’s publication of this new five-year strategy this summer, which seeks to achieve what they term a “smokefree generation”.

Despite a long-term reduction in smoking rates, tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable premature deaths and ill health, accounting for about 100,000 deaths each year in the UK. In addition, 23% of all hospital admissions for respiratory problems in 2014-15 were directly attributable to smoking. I thoroughly welcome the falling adult smoking rates in England—down from 46% in 1974 to 15.5% in 2016—but I have to say to the Minister and to the House that we cannot take this work for granted. That is why we need the tough but achievable targets that the new current control plan contains.

Smoking and the harm it causes are not evenly distributed, as hon. Members will know. People in more deprived areas are more likely to smoke and less likely to quit. Smoking is increasingly concentrated in more disadvantaged groups and is the main contributor to health inequalities in England. Men and women from the most deprived groups have more than double the death rate from lung cancer of those from the least deprived areas of the UK. I am not saying there is exactly a north-south divide, but where money is divided in such a way that is likely to happen. Rates do vary between north and south on occasion, as we see if we examine smoking during pregnancy rates, which vary from 2% in the Central London clinical commissioning group area to 27% in the Blackpool CCG area.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Data produced by Public Health England show that in my local authority area 18.1% of women smoke at the time of delivery compared with the national average of 10.6%.

The plan says that it will reduce the prevalence of smoking during pregnancy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that every CCG and local authority will have to have sufficient funds to carry this work forward?

Sir Kevin Barron: Clearly that is the case. I agree with this publication and its intention, but there will be issues to address on different forms of funding. I will
discuss that a little later in my speech. We can see from the two figures from central London and Blackpool that there is a challenge out there; this difference alone can have a dramatic impact on health inequalities, as maternal smoking causes up to 5,000 miscarriages, 300 perinatal deaths and 2,200 premature births in the UK each year.

In my area of Rotherham alone, the smoking rate among people in managerial and professional occupations is about 10.2%, but that leaps to 29.4% among those who have never worked or are long-term unemployed. Such facts clearly show that we are still struggling to get through to certain groups within society, and the Government must do more to identify ways of getting through to these difficult-to-reach groups.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is setting out the harm caused by tobacco. As a recent convert to the benefit of e-cigarettes in assisting people to stop smoking, I wonder whether he will be talking about the valuable role they play. Does he agree that it is a bit of a shame that the tobacco control plan does not go further in recognising the role that e-cigarettes can play?

Sir Kevin Barron: I will comment on that, but I think the hon. Gentleman ought to be happy that this is the first time in any tobacco control plan that e-cigarettes have been mentioned and there is some intent to do things with them.

I welcome the acknowledgment of the seriousness of the issue for people with long-standing mental health problems, as the smoking rate is a staggering 40% among those with a serious mental illness. That is another area that needs to be targeted and worked on. The control plan rightly states that joined-up working and integrated commissioning between local government and the NHS are very important. This is not just the case in hospitals when people are admitted; we must focus on prevention and early diagnosis. For example, dentists are the only healthcare professionals who frequently see healthy patients. I am aware that some GPs—we have one sat here in the Chamber—talk to healthy people even though these people do not think they are healthy at the time, but the situation is a little different for dentists. This early identification is crucial, as mouth cancer patients have a 90% chance of survival if the condition is detected early, but that plummets to just 50% if their diagnosis is delayed.

I say to the hon. Gentleman that I worked in an industry where people used to chew tobacco because we could not smoke at work. I tried it once at the age of about 16 and I am pleased to say that I never went near it again, although I used to smoke cigarettes when I came up from undergroves—that is a long, long time ago now. The general health implications of smoking are well known and documented, but mouth cancer often gets overlooked. This is the point: despite its killing more people in the UK than cervical and testicular cancers combined, there is still an alarming lack of public awareness towards oral cancer. There are thousands of chemicals contained in a single cigarette, and their point of entry is the mouth. Smoking helps to transform saliva into a deadly cocktail that damages cells in the mouth and can turn them cancerous.

Pharmacy teams also have an important role to play in promoting and encouraging attempts to stop smoking: as Members will know, in Healthy Living pharmacies and others, this is part of the job they do in advising people. These teams can be trained to be very effective in that. This often occurs in the community, but hospital and GP-based pharmacists are also well placed to offer this support. They are well placed to offer stop-smoking interventions with behavioural support and medication. In fact, the National Pharmacy Association is re-evaluating its position on e-cigarettes. As frontline healthcare professionals, pharmacists and dentists are exquisitely positioned to make a difference to health outcomes.

The Government must look to protect public health funding for stop-smoking services in particular if their aims are to be achieved. A growing number of local authorities have already stopped providing stop-smoking services for general smokers. The King’s Fund also highlighted that in 2017-18 local authority funding for tobacco control faces cuts of more than 30%. We have seen the transfer of commissioning responsibilities for public health services to local authorities, and subsequent cuts to the public health grant. A study by Cancer Research UK and ASH—Action on Smoking and Health, an organisation I have been involved in for more than two decades—found that 39% of local authorities reduced their smoking cessation budgets, despite the public health budget being ring-fenced by central Government. These are the issues that are happening down below, but we need to be aware of them.

All this has led to a reduction in mass media campaigns to motivate quitting, which are so vital to direct people towards the services that are on offer. Only this morning, I saw that the British Lung Foundation has published a report showing, yet again, that stop-smoking support is one of the most cost-effective treatments for people with COPD—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Recently, in my role as vice-chair of the all-party group on smoking and health, I visited a smoking-cessation service—the one led by Louise Ross in Leicester. The team in Leicester have been trailblazers in the use of e-cigarettes for cessation purposes. They told me that Leicester’s stop-smoking service was the first in the country to go “e-cigarette-friendly” on No Smoking Day 2014. Since then, the team has built up a comprehensive bank of knowledge and insights, developed from many discussions with both vapers and smokers, that can be
drawn on to help people get the best advice when they decide they have had enough of smoking. I had a discussion with a nurse who works in that service and who was using e-cigarettes in working with pregnant women to try to address our awful statistics on the effect of smoking in pregnancy. Most smoking-cessation services could do worse than talk to the people in Leicester about exactly what they are doing on that.

There has clearly been an increase in e-cigarette usage since the publication of the previous strategy in 2011: in 2012, there were some 700,000 e-cigarette users, and that had risen to 2.8 million by 2016. There is growing evidence to support the successful use of e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation aid. The Office for National Statistics found that in 2016, some 470,000 people were using e-cigarettes as an aid to stop smoking, while an estimated 2 million people had used the products and completely stopped smoking. I believe that e-cigarettes played a huge part in the beating of the target in the previous tobacco control plan. It is clear that e-cigarettes do not suit everyone, though, so there still needs to be a wide range of licensed stop-smoking medication to use alongside much-needed behavioural support.

Alex Cunningham: Some 4,000 people in my Stockton North constituency use e-cigarettes and 14,000 people still smoke. Can my right hon. Friend envisage a day when e-cigarettes are available on prescription, like other products?

Sir Kevin Barron: I actually had this conversation in Leicester, although I was not going to mention it in my speech. There is an issue—I think it was in a column in one of the national newspapers many months ago and I have tried to avoid it. If somebody avoids spending £20 or £25 a week on cigarettes, should they get free NHS prescriptions, if they are eligible, to help them to quit? There is a debate there, but I shall say no more than that at this stage.

I asked the team in Leicester what they thought about e-cigarettes on prescription for people who are eligible for free prescriptions, and they said that there might be a case for doing it for a month to break the person away from the cigarette-smoking habit and get them on to e-cigarettes. For the purposes of this debate, I shall leave that where it sits, but there might be a case for it. We clearly need more evidence on the use of e-cigarettes for smoking cessation so that we can make a better estimate.

Mark Pawsey: I accept that the right hon. Gentleman wishes to park the issue of whether e-cigarettes should be available on prescription, but does he think that e-cigarette manufacturers should have a little more freedom—the tobacco products directive places restrictions on the advertising of e-cigarettes—to tell people about the nature of their products and how they can help people to switch from tobacco?

Sir Kevin Barron: I shall address that briefly, because I know that other Members wish to get involved in the debate. The simple answer is that that is one of several issues that need to be addressed.

The best thing smokers can do for their health is of course to quit smoking altogether, but it is clear that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful to health than smoking tobacco. Public Health England found that e-cigarettes are around 95% less harmful than smoking cigarettes. My instinct is that the remaining 5% is down to the fact that they have not yet been tested for long enough for it to be said that there is little or no danger at all. There is no evidence that e-cigarettes act as a smoking gateway for children or non-smokers, but research is still needed on their long-term use, and it should be carried out. Quitting smoking is always best, but there is clearly a hard core of smokers who have so far struggled to quit; they must be the people we focus on. It is worrying that an ASH survey found over a three-year period that the number of people who thought that e-cigs were “as or more dangerous” than cigarettes rose from 7% to 26%. That is why we need Government-funded research. I find it incredible that statistic is moving in that direction, rather than the opposite, although I must say that the debate on e-cigarettes, both in the Chamber and elsewhere, has not always been particularly clear.

Other innovations are continuing the “nicotine revolution”. Manufacturers are developing additional smoke-free products to persuade heavy smokers who would not otherwise quit smoking to switch to smoke-free alternatives, among which are the heated-tobacco products that have come on to the scene in the past year or so. Referred to in the “novel tobacco products” category of the tobacco control plan, such products could be the next step to reaching those hard-core smokers who, although they did not get on with e-cigarettes, are looking for another way out of smoking. I was pleased to see in the plan that Public Health England will continue to lead the investigation into the use of novel products as stop-smoking tools, with the evidence updated annually, and that PHE acknowledges that novel products are currently the most popular aid to stopping smoking in England.

Many people are wary of so-called novel products and the fact that many are produced or funded by tobacco companies. We must recognise that tobacco companies have in the past been extremely dishonest about the harms of smoking and the products they have sold, so we urgently need more research on these devices, and I hope the Government’s annual review will help to provide more information. I have been anti-tobacco for more than two decades in this House, but we should not ignore the potential benefits for people who have not been able to stop with more traditional smoking-cessation products just because some of these products have tobacco connections. It is vital that we all focus our minds on the reality of getting people off this habit that is still killing people and shortening the lives of more than 100,000 of our fellow citizens every year.

Many of the products I am talking about are covered by the EU tobacco product directive, which has resulted in many good things, including the establishment of reporting and notification requirements for tobacco products. Nevertheless, stakeholders have raised issues with some of the other requirements, and we may be able to use Brexit as a chance to look at the directive. I understand that we have been invited into the TPD at the last minute. We have had the debate and I do not want to bore anyone with it further. We need to move on, because that is what happens in politics sometimes.
We need to talk about what should be happening now and in future for the sake of our fellow citizens. Brexit is coming, so we should not be tied into a timetable for any changes to the TPD—although I do not even know the potential timetable for any further debate on Brexit. Nevertheless, if there is any discussion about changes to the TPD, we need to ensure that all stakeholders are involved in working groups to design a directive that works for the good of the United Kingdom, taking into account the issues I have mentioned.

For all its positives, there is a glaring problem with the tobacco control plan, and we all know what it is: money. Although not short on lofty ambitions, local authorities face huge strain and will not be able to deliver the kind of joined-up smoking-cessation services that the tobacco control plan deserves. Luckily, there are people who can help. Tobacco companies have made a fortune selling cigarettes. We might well argue that they got us into the mess we are now in, so it is only right they get should us out of it. They have the resources and customer base to help smoking cessation tools to get straight to the people who need them most. If the industry is willing to commit to a future based on e-cigarettes and other reduced-harm products, we should take them on the offer and allow the Government and local authorities to partner with them to ensure we have the financial and technical assistance needed to help smokers to quit. I would not have said that five years ago, but five years ago we did not have these products that can clearly help a lot of our fellow citizens.

Alex Cunningham: It was remiss of me earlier not to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for all his work on this issue in recent years. Will he talk a little about people with mental health conditions and the fact that the tobacco control plan emphasises the need for parity of esteem in their treatment, in a similar way as there should be parity of esteem between the treatment of mental health conditions and the treatment of the general population? For that parity of esteem, the professionals who work with people with mental health conditions would need the necessary expertise and education. Will my right hon. Friend join me in encouraging the Minister to step up education for mental health professionals so that they, too, can be part of the campaign to help people to quit smoking?

Sir Kevin Barron: I will indeed. The use of e-cigarettes in mental health institutions or in prisons could go a long way towards alleviating some of the problems in such institutions. When I was Chair of the Health Committee, we looked into smoking in public places in 2005-06, and we saw tobacco in effect being used as a fashion accessory; it is the way towards lung and mouth cancer, strokes and heart disease and a host of other related deaths a day in England, which costs the NHS millions every year. I welcome the plan and the £16 billion that has been ring-fenced by the Government for local public health services until 2021.

Those who use a local stop-smoking service are four times more likely to quit. The figures are astonishing. As the daughter of a smoker of more than 20 years, I have seen at first hand the journey that needs to be replicated to achieve the goal of a “smoke-free generation”. The success of the 2011 to 2015 tobacco control plan reduced adult smoking rates from just over 20% to just over 15%. The aim now is to reduce rates to 12% and lower by 2022. That is not only right, but essential. We must work to save the 79,000 preventable deaths in England per year and the £11 billion that smoking is costing the economy.

Smoking is not a necessity. A cigarette is not a fashion accessory; it is the way towards lung and mouth cancer, strokes and heart disease and a host of other by increasing taxation, which has been happening in this country for many years now. I will certainly have a close eye on the Budget in a few weeks’ time, as we need a renewed commitment from the Government to the tobacco tax escalator. Any money that is raised should be ring-fenced for use in smoking cessation and mass media campaigns to motivate quitting and enforcement of age of sale, which is also an issue. When the mass media campaigns ended after the 2010 general election—people were no longer seeing them on television or in other parts of their life—the demand for smoking cessation services reduced.

We all want a smoke-free society as soon as possible. We on the Labour Benches, and even some tobacco companies, are now saying that as well, so the Government could not ask for a better opportunity to take this further, to do it more comprehensively and with more success. The challenge now is to make sure that reality lives up to these ambitions. The tobacco control plan needs to be properly implemented and built on if we are to achieve those goals.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next person to speak, may I say that we have plenty of time for this debate and I hope that we will manage without a formal time limit? I much prefer to rely on the reasonableness and honour of hon. Members to have regard for others as well as themselves. If every speaker takes approximately eight minutes or so, then everybody who has indicated their wish to speak will have an equal chance to do so. If that does not happen, I will impose a time limit.

1.1 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in today’s debate on the Government’s tobacco control plan, which was unveiled in July 2017 and is supported by the British Heart Foundation. It is a co-ordinated effort to bring together the NHS, the Department of Health and local government to tackle smoking.

Although smoking in the UK is declining, the problem should not be underestimated. There are still 7.3 million adult smokers in the UK, and more than 200 smoking-related deaths a day in England, which costs the NHS millions every year. I welcome the plan and the £16 billion that has been ring-fenced by the Government for local public health services until 2021.

In conclusion, the tobacco control plan offers the groundwork for a comprehensive strategy that is much broader than just cessation and that must include measures that reduce uptake as well as those that increase quitting. They should include reducing the affordability of tobacco control.
ailments and illnesses that kill. Let me be clear: I believe in choice and individual freedom, but I also believe that the Government have a role not only to guide, but to signpost and to promote the choices that will lead to healthier lifestyles. That is why I am so proud that the Government are prioritising the issue of smoking.

Some people have said to me: “Michelle if people want to smoke, let them.” I respond by saying that we must arm those people with all the information—the warnings and the facts. We must work together to deglamorise smoking. As has been pointed out, the smoking industry also has a responsibility to play its part. We must guide people and steer them to make informed choices. We must also discourage them, otherwise we will have to pay their NHS bills—money that could be spent in other sectors of the NHS. I often ask people, “If smoking were invented today and we knew all the risks and effects, would it be so freely available and popular?” Armed with the facts, we often make different choices in life.

My mother started smoking in an era when the health consequences were not known. I saw her struggle, desperately trying to give up. My Dad describes that time as a caricature, with my mother wearing anti-smoking patches and smoking cigarettes, while chewing anti-smoking gum and seeing a hypnotist, all at the same time. She simply tried everything. All the hypnotist did was to get her on to menthol cigarettes and give her a fear of hypnotists, so that did not go quite to plan. That taught me that, to break the cycle, it needs to be killed at the root, and people need to be prevented from smoking in the first place. I must add that my Mum has now not smoked a cigarette for seven years. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Instead, she has e-cigarettes. Although that cannot be seen as the answer, it is very much part of the solution.

As part of the tobacco control plan, I want to touch on the support provided for pregnant workers, which aims significantly to reduce the likelihood of a person smoking while having a child. Currently, more than 10% of pregnant women smoke, and the plan is to get it down to 6%. Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of stillbirth. Babies born to mothers who smoke are more likely to be born underdeveloped and in poor health. It is important that we give those mothers all the support and information available. For example, within the plan, NHS England will work to reduce smoking in pregnancy through carbon monoxide testing at antenatal care facilities and referrals to stop smoking services through the Saving Babies’ Lives care bundle.

Support, advice and information are crucial. We must make sure that all mothers are aware of the dangers of smoking. I urge us to be bold—bold with our information and bold with our warnings.

Alex Cunningham: Information is key to this matter as well. ASH has told me that the Government no longer have the measure of the number of people with mental health conditions who smoke. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government need to re-establish a national measure for smoking rates among people with mental health conditions, as that will aid planning and the provision of services?

Michelle Donelan: Indeed, we have problems among many categories in the country. By 2018, the target is to ensure that all mental health facilities are smoke free. We need to identify why people with mental health problems are turning to smoking and then target those issues.

I urge us to be bold with our information and warnings. We should not be afraid to shock in our marketing material, because we in this House have a duty to those who have yet to have a voice and the ability to choose for themselves.

As I mentioned before, perhaps the section of the plan that will prove the most successful is the backing of evidence-based research into e-cigarettes. As the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) said, it is the first plan to reference e-cigarettes. In 2016, it was estimated that 2 million people had used e-cigarettes and completely stopped smoking, while a further 470,000 were using them as an aid to quit.

There has been a great deal of discussion on e-cigarettes—the pros and the cons—so what is needed now is more evidence to support them and enable their use positively. They are not risk free and they are addictive—it would be wrong not to mention that—but I agree with Public Health England, which recommends that e-cigarettes are used in areas not covered by the smoke-free legislation and that organisations do not include them in their smoking policies. It is true that we do not know the full extent of the medical effects, but we do know that, for the majority of people, they are the only way to stop smoking and they are by far a better alternative.

In addition, statistics show that people rarely start on e-cigarettes. They use them as a way of breaking their cigarette addictions. It is important to remember that, to tackle smoking effectively, we need a prevention strategy as well as a strategy to help people quit smoking. Dr Andy McEwen, executive director of the National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training, stated that switching from tobacco to e-cigarettes substantially reduces the major health risk. I urge the Minister to push the case for a review by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which currently is at odds with Public Health England on this topic.

As I said, we have seen many worried headlines about e-cigarettes, particularly for young people. However, the latest and largest study, based on five separate surveys, gathered data from 2015 to 2017 and was from a collaboration including experts from Public Health England. It showed that a tenth to a fifth of 11 to 16-year-olds had tried an e-cigarette. However, only 3% or fewer used them regularly, and they were already smoking tobacco-based products. Among young people who have never smoked, the use of e-cigarettes was completely negligible, despite the media headlines. It is also important to remember that they are restricted in terms of the minimum age sale and the tight restriction on marketing.

Let us be clear: the best thing that a smoker can do is to quit smoking. However, the evidence is increasingly clear that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful to health than smoking tobacco.

Another area that I want to mention is inequality in smoking. By 2022, the Government expect to reduce the inequality gap in smoking prevalence between those in lower paid or manual occupations and those in higher
paid or professional occupations. For example, the plan includes promoting links to “stop smoking” services across health and care systems in the UK. However, it is important that, we look at the challenges that are faced by the disadvantaged and those from lower socio-economic groups.

As someone who believes in low tax in general, it would be remiss of me not to point out that on this subject I passionately argue that we should maintain a high duty rate for tobacco products. It is a disincentive for people to start smoking, especially the young, and I urge the Government to go further in the upcoming Budget. Of course, enforcement is nothing without encouragement to give up. So, to conclude, I echo the sentiments that tackling smoking requires a plan—a plan that seeks to prevent smoking, but also assists those who currently want to give up smoking. This plan does that. Treating smoking-related illnesses is estimated to cost the NHS £2.5 billion a year, while the wider cost to society is a staggering £12.7 billion. But the real cost is the human lives—those that are cut short, and the families that suffer: families in Wiltshire, in my constituency, and up and down the country. I am delighted that in Wiltshire there are now 25% fewer hospital deaths from smoking-related illnesses, but that is still too many, and that is why creating a smoke-free generation is essential.

1.12 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I am concerned about the damage that smoking does to my constituents. Almost 15% of the population of Suffolk smoke. More than 7,500 admissions to Suffolk hospitals every year are attributable to smoking. Those who do not quit will have roughly a one in two chance of dying prematurely from smoking-related diseases.

The tobacco industry is deliberately producing products that it knows will kill its customers. While the market for cigarettes is mercifully in decline in the UK and other rich countries around the world, it is still growing in low-income countries, where the industry regularly uses tactics that would be illegal in this country, including the deliberate sale and marketing of cigarettes to young people and children. As a result, more than 7 million people die from the consequences of tobacco use each year. Almost four fifths of the world’s 1 billion smokers now live in low and middle-income countries. Money spent on tobacco is money not spent on other household needs. In Kenya and Bangladesh, tobacco cultivation has replaced food crops, leading to local food insecurity. In Malawi, at least 78,000 children are forced to work in tobacco fields, preventing most of them from attending school. Tobacco growing around the world is responsible for a loss of biodiversity, land pollution due to the use of pesticides, soil degradation, deforestation and water pollution.

It is impossible to hold an ethical investment in a tobacco company. To invest in tobacco is to seek to make money from environmental destruction, social exploitation, disease and premature death. That is increasingly understood by investors, because last year AXA, one of the world’s largest insurers and a major part of the Ipswich economy, divested more than $2 billion of tobacco industry assets. I welcome its decision. Tobacco-free investment policies have also been announced by AP4, one of the most influential pension funds in Sweden; Medibank, the largest health insurer in Australia; Fonds de Réserve pour les Retraites, France’s public pension fund; the Irish sovereign investment fund; and CalPERS, the largest public pension fund in the USA. So far in 2017, tobacco-free investment decisions have been made by AMP Capital, Bank of New Zealand, SCOR, PME, ACTIAM and Aviva, the largest insurer in the UK. In addition, ABN AMRO, the global bank, will cease lending to tobacco manufacturers. Those very welcome individual decisions now constitute a clear trend.

In that context, it is increasingly absurd that large investments in tobacco are still held by local authority pension funds across the United Kingdom. There is a fundamental contradiction between the local authorities’ public health responsibilities and their investments in tobacco, which actively promote the biggest public health problem confronting this country.

I understand that pension fund trustees have a duty to run their funds to secure strong returns for beneficiaries. Local authority workers depend on sound investments for their pensions. Case law has now made it clear that local authority pension fund trustees may consider non-financial factors when setting investment strategies, provided that any restrictions they place on investment as a result of such consideration do not significantly affect financial returns. But how immoral does an investment have to be before the financial returns no longer trump the moral question?

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful argument, but will he consider the fact that many tobacco manufacturers are actively investing in non-tobacco products, which may change their whole future investment strategy? In the light of that fact, should not investors—pension funds and so on—look at that long-term development of such businesses rather than their current position?

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I do not agree with him. If a company is producing something that is detrimental to the whole world, the best approach is to divest from it.

How bad does an investment have to be before its financial returns no longer trump the moral question? Are there no factors that could lead a pension fund to divest on moral grounds alone? Such factors could—and in my view should—include the UK’s treaty obligations. For example, article 5.3 of the framework convention on tobacco control, to which the UK is of course a party, states:

“In setting and implementing their public health policies with respect to tobacco control, Parties shall act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry in accordance with national law.”
Guidelines for the implementation of article 5.3 were agreed back in November 2008 at the third conference of the parties to the convention. Recommendation 4.7 states:

“Government institutions and their bodies should not have any financial interest in the tobacco industry, unless they are responsible for managing a Party’s ownership interest in a State-owned tobacco industry.”

I am delighted that the UK has no state-owned tobacco industry, but the level of public investment in private tobacco firms in this country flies in the face of the convention.

As leader of the opposition at Suffolk County Council—before I was elected to this august House—I brought forward a motion proposing that the county’s pension fund should divest from tobacco funds. The motion was passed unanimously. The pension fund committee then commissioned legal opinion on how to divest, but the opinion was that the committee could not legally do so.

Does the Minister believe that our local authorities should also invest in, say, pornography—a very profitable business I am led to believe? Profit should not be the only consideration for pension fund investment. We can also invest in, say, pornography, which I think stretched what he had to say—except perhaps about pension funds investing in pornography, which I think stretched what he had to say.

Ipswich (Sandy Martin). I agreed with almost all of what he had to say—except perhaps about pension funds investing in pornography, which I think stretched what he had to say.

I should declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on smoking and health. For me, this is a personal issue: both my parents died of cancer, directly as a result of smoking, and I do not want anyone to go through what my family had to go through.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin). I agreed with almost all of what he had to say—except perhaps about pension funds investing in pornography, which I think stretched what he had to say.

I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron), who I have known since I was elected as a great champion of anti-tobacco and anti-smoking measures.

I should declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on smoking and health. For me, this is a personal issue: both my parents died of cancer, directly as a result of smoking, and I do not want anyone to go through what my family had to go through.

My hon. Friend the new Minister for public health is the third Minister I have berated about getting the tobacco control plan published, and I congratulate him on the fact that it was duly published almost in his first few days in his role. I thank him for that, and I look forward to many such measures, which we will be calling for, being given equal standing and impetus.

We should, of course, review the outcome of the previous plan, which expired at the end of 2015. The three ambitions of the old plan, which included reducing smoking rates among adults and children, were more than achieved, and I congratulate Government on both political persuasions on that. We just about made the target of reducing the level of smoking among pregnant women to below 11%, although that happened somewhat later than envisaged in the plan. We now have the lowest prevalence of smoking ever recorded among adults and children.

We are still in the position where 80,000 people a year die from preventable smoking-related diseases, and the single cause of that is tobacco. It is the only product available legally that, if people use it as the manufacturer intends, will kill them. My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) made the point that were tobacco to be discovered now, there is no chance that it would ever get to the stage it has.

Tobacco kills half of lifetime smokers. On average, smokers lose 10 years of their life expectancy. For every death that is caused, about 20 smokers suffer from a smoking-related disease, so the problem is not only death but smoking-related diseases and the cost to the health service.

Every year in Harrow, my local borough, about 1,500 hospital admissions and 200 premature deaths are caused by smoking-related diseases. If we extend the picture across the country, we see that there is a huge problem.

Tobacco control policy should have as its objective the end of smoking, which I absolutely support. The Minister states in the plan that the aim is “to create a smokefree generation”, which is a wonderful idea, but if we go further into the plan, we see that the aim is to cut smoking rates to no more than 12% by 2022. That is too weak a target—we should be looking to go much lower than 12% by 2022.

I particularly welcome the targets to cut the number of 15-year-olds who smoke regularly to lower than 3%, and to cut the number of pregnant women who smoke to less than 6%. Those key targets will have long-term effects. The reality is that most people who smoke—two thirds—acquire the habit before the age of 18, so one of the key issues is to prevent young people from starting to smoke. If we can achieve that, we can make sure that we cut off the supply of smokers. We know that once people are addicted, it is much harder for them to give up smoking.

Funding for tobacco control is essential. We need to be clear that the headline figure for public health spending has increased since 2013, rising 25% each year, but that does not take into account the extra responsibilities that local authorities have. Analysis by the King’s Fund has shown that once we take those responsibilities into account, local authority spending on public health has fallen in real terms since 2013-14 by 5%. At the same time, the population has grown by 3%, so the reality is that we are seeing a reduction in spending.

In Harrow, spending on tobacco control has fallen from £364,000 a year in 2013-14 to £9,000 in the current year—a decline of 98%. If we analyse Department for Communities and Local Government returns, we see that spending on tobacco control across the country has fallen by 33%. That cannot be acceptable.

It is clear that one of the issues we have to address is stop smoking services, which are key to helping people to get off smoking in the first place. They are highly cost-effective and they would make sure that we reduced the number of deaths. Every smoker who goes to a GP or any doctor should be relayed to a stop smoking service immediately to help them to give up smoking. Clearly, that will cost money, and I share the view of my
hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham that the tobacco industry should pay for the damage it does to our national health service and our health. Imperial and Japan Tobacco International make joint profits of about £1 billion a year, and they should be charged for cleaning up the damage that these products cause on the basis that the polluter pays. In the United States, the tobacco industry is required to pay an annual user fee, which means that the Food and Drug Administration collects more than $2 billion a year.

The Government introduced the annual tax escalator of 2% above inflation, but that is due to end in 2020. We should increase it and make sure that the money raised is ring-fenced so that it can be used to implement smoking-cessation measures. That would not only encourage the tobacco industry to look at what it does to prevent people from smoking, but discourage it from manipulating prices to subsidise cheaper brands and encourage people on low incomes, or young people, to start smoking—we know that the industry does precisely that. As we move in that direction, we should see an increase in tobacco tax.

A licensing system for tobacco should be introduced to make sure that we have complete control, from manufacturer to retailer. That would ensure that we could have proper enforcement all the way through the process and take action against the illicit trade.

One issue that is very prevalent, but is not mentioned in the tobacco control plan, is oral cancers. The British Dental Association estimates that between 91% and 93% of oral cancers are preventable and that two thirds are caused directly by smoking or by chewing tobacco. Large numbers of people who originate from the Indian subcontinent—between 40% and 50%—chew tobacco that is unregulated. There are no warnings on any of this tobacco and nor is there any estimate of how much damage it is doing, but large numbers of people from the Indian subcontinent who chew tobacco routinely present with oral cancer as a result. We should make sure that there are health warnings on these products, and that people are warned about the consequences of taking them. Tobacco does not have to be included within these products, but frequently it is included. If tobacco is involved, clearly there should be warnings and proper regulation should be in place. My hon. Friend the Minister has suggested that there are no plans to do anything about this, but I urge him to review the situation very closely, examine the evidence, and then act in the same way that he has done on the tobacco control plan.

1.30 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) for securing this important debate.

There used to be a time when cigarettes were perceived as cool—but people were being conned. Powerful tobacco companies were placing their products in movies and using careful branding to make us think that cigarettes would make us more attractive, more athletic, or even smarter. What they forgot to tell us was that they also leave people unable to breathe, cause heart attacks, and kill half of those who use them. Some 15% of adults in the UK still smoke. In some parts of my constituency, half of all people still smoke. Not surprisingly, these are also the areas where people die youngest. I predict that in 50 years’ time nobody will smoke. We will look back on the 20th and early 21st centuries and shake our heads and laugh at the idea that people were poisoned with tobacco and paid for the privilege.

Like many Members in the Chamber, I would like to see England smoke-free. That means no young people starting to smoke because they know that it will make their breath smell and their teeth bad, no pregnant women smoking because they know that each time they smoke a cigarette their baby is also smoking a cigarette, and no young parents smoking because they know that their kids will copy them as soon as they are old enough. It means people in their 40s and 50s quitting, because lungs decline rapidly if people continue smoking beyond this age, and in time they struggle to breathe. It is never too late to stop. It is best never to start, because stopping smoking is one of the hardest things that someone will ever do—but one of the most worthwhile. As many Members have mentioned, half of all cigarette smokers will die of smoking-related conditions. There is a powerful case for continuing to take stronger action towards a smoke-free society, and I welcome much of the tobacco control plan for England.

It is important to recognise success. Smoking rates in the north-east of England have fallen to just over 17%—down by almost a half since 2005, and the largest regional fall in smoking rates in the country. Having 200,000 fewer smokers in the region could mean 100,000 fewer premature deaths. This is, in part, due to the work of successive Governments who have pushed the issue up the agenda.

I welcome all the ambitious targets that the tobacco control plan for England sets for future reductions, but I particularly welcome the focus on stopping smoking in disadvantaged social groups. The decline in smoking in our society has not been uniform and, as in many areas of society, many people have been left behind. However, it is wrong to think that just providing services to people living in poverty will be enough. My experience of working in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in England has taught me that health behaviours do not occur in isolation. It is genuinely hard for someone to stop smoking if they are worried about how they are going to pay their next bills; they are threatened with losing their benefits, perhaps even having to wait six weeks for universal credit; they have insecure work; they live in a community threatened by crime and antisocial behaviour; and they are struggling to look after their family. Smoking is often a symptom of other problems. Reducing smoking requires poverty reduction and true engagement at a community level to make life better and easier for people living in areas of deprivation.

I would now like to focus on those with mental health conditions. As has been mentioned, the smoking rate among people with mental health conditions has remained stubbornly high. In Stockton South, the rate is about 40%, even though smoking rates have fallen among the rest of the population. It is one of the single largest factors in the lower than average life expectancy among people with a mental health condition. For someone who has a mental health problem, stopping smoking is good not just for their physical health but for their mental health too. There is evidence that if someone...
with depression stops smoking, it can have an effect on improving their mental wellbeing similar to taking antidepressants.

Closing the gap in smoking rates is not a straightforward task. It is a challenge that requires a collaborative approach, including not just the NHS but communities, mental health charities, anti-smoking organisations and, not least, smokers themselves. I welcome the plan’s commitment to work with the Mental Health and Smoking Partnership to identify how we reduce rates of smoking in this population. However, while the ambition of the plan is welcome, it is not clear how the Government intend to assess progress within the population of those with mental health problems. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us what he intends to do to make sure that there are reliable, national ways of measuring smoking rates among the whole population of those with mental health conditions, not just those with severe mental health problems. Government should know how they will assess whether targets are being achieved.

Like other Members, I am concerned about cuts that local authorities are making to public health funding, their hands often tied by huge Government cuts. I am particularly concerned about cuts in smoking cessation services. The evidence is quite clear: well-run services that combine behavioural therapy and prescription of nicotine replacement products offer smokers who want to quit the best chance of success. Community-based interventions to tackle inequalities are stressed in the plan, but that will be empty rhetoric unless the funds to do this work follow. The five-year forward view and the sustainability and transformation partnerships place a significant emphasis on prevention. The pressure on NHS services in future can be significantly eased if we ensure that we make the necessary investments in prevention now. Government must finance the public health provision necessary to put effective tobacco control policies into action and to enforce tobacco control legislation where necessary to put effective tobacco control policies into action. The five-year forward view and the sustainability and transformation partnerships place a significant emphasis on prevention. The pressure on NHS services in future can be significantly eased if we ensure that we make the necessary investments in prevention now. Government must finance the public health provision necessary to put effective tobacco control policies into action and to enforce tobacco control legislation where necessary to put effective tobacco control policies into action.

It would be a welcome boost if the political consensus that exists in this House—it spreads across all parties—on the need for tobacco control were supported by a commitment to fund local authorities in England to deliver the radical steps that we now need to make the next push towards a smoke-free society.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I rise to speak primarily as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss. I apologise to some extent if I appear a little like a broken record on this subject, but in many respects I do not apologise because we have so much work to do in this area. I want to focus, if I may, on smoking in pregnancy. My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) has eloquently put some of these points already, but I want to go into somewhat more detail.

The Prime Minister spoke of the burning injustice that sees the poorest in this country die on average nine years earlier than the richest. It is essential for the tobacco control plan significantly to reduce the health inequality between richest and poorest in Britain. Those who earn £10,000 a year are twice as likely to smoke as those who earn £40,000. As the Minister knows, we have massive issues with regard to smoking in pregnancy and regional variation: 2% in Richmond, 2.2% in Wokingham, and 2.4% in Hammersmith; yet 26.6% in Blackpool, 24.4% in South Tyneside, and 24.1% in north-east Lincolnshire. Women in routine and manual jobs are almost three times more likely to smoke during pregnancy than those in managerial and professional roles. Teenage mothers are six times more likely than those over 35 to smoke throughout their pregnancy.

I applaud the success of the 2011 to 2015 tobacco control plan. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) pointed out, we exceeded the ambitions in the plan and reduced the adult smoking rate from 20.1% to 15.5%. I also applaud the Minister’s ambition to reduce the rate of adult smoking from 15.5% to 12% or less by 2022, and I further welcome the ambition to reduce the prevalence of smoking in pregnancy from 10.7% to 6% or less, notwithstanding my earlier point about regional variation.

To be clear, this is absolutely not about criticizing or demonising women who smoke during pregnancy. Tobacco, as Members have already pointed out, is highly addictive and it can be incredibly difficult to stop smoking. In relation to stillbirth and neonatal death, the Government have set some really ambitious targets: to reduce the rate by 20% by 2020, and to cut it in half by 2030. In order to achieve that, we have to be clear about the fact that the biggest modifiable risk factor for those issues is smoking in pregnancy. I have raised these statistics in the House before, and I make no apology for reiterating them today. One in five stillbirths is associated with smoking, and women who smoke are 27% more likely to have a miscarriage. Their risk of having a stillbirth is a third higher than that of non-smokers. Mothers who smoke are more likely to have pre-term births and babies who are small for their gestational age.

The number of sudden infant deaths could be reduced by more than 30% if children were not exposed to second-hand smoke. The Royal College of Physicians has estimated that 20% of pregnant women are exposed to second-hand smoke during pregnancy. Maternal exposure to second-hand smoke during pregnancy is an independent risk factor for premature birth and low birth weight, but only one in four may make any changes to their smoking habits when their partner is pregnant. The number of sudden infant deaths could be reduced by more than 30% if children were not exposed to second-hand smoke. The Royal College of Physicians has estimated that 20% of pregnant women are exposed to second-hand smoke during pregnancy.

Then we have second-hand smoke. Maternal exposure to second-hand smoke during pregnancy is an independent risk factor for premature birth and low birth weight, but only one in four may make any changes to their smoking habits when their partner is pregnant. The number of sudden infant deaths could be reduced by more than 30% if children were not exposed to second-hand smoke. The Royal College of Physicians has estimated that 20% of pregnant women are exposed to second-hand smoke during pregnancy. Maternal exposure to second-hand smoke during pregnancy is an independent risk factor for premature birth and low birth weight, but only one in four may make any changes to their smoking habits when their partner is pregnant. The number of sudden infant deaths could be reduced by more than 30% if children were not exposed to second-hand smoke. The Royal College of Physicians has estimated that 20% of pregnant women are exposed to second-hand smoke during pregnancy.

I want briefly to raise with Ministers the question of vaping and e-cigarettes. Although I appreciate, notwithstanding points already made by colleagues, that the jury is still out on these products to some extent, and although quitting outright is always the aim, these products must surely be better than smoking, especially for pregnant women. I encourage the Minister to work with the Treasury to investigate some kind of levy on the tobacco industry. Incidentally, the tobacco industry has huge investments in vaping and e-cigarettes; in fact, most of the biggest e-cigarette companies are owned by the major tobacco manufacturers.
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Perhaps I should start by declaring an interest as an electronic cigarette smoker myself. I have seen at first hand the health benefits of moving from smoking to electronic cigarettes, including being able to run much further and feeling much healthier. A smoker who gives up for, say, six months will start to feel the same benefits. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a lot more research in this area.

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend—I use that description intentionally—for that intervention, and I think she is absolutely right. Without wanting in any way to sound patronising, I applaud her for making the move from smoking cigarettes to using e-cigarettes. The evidence is out there to suggest that it is a great way to transition off smoking and off nicotine entirely. Far more research needs to be done in this area, and I hope that the Chancellor is looking at how we could, in the Budget, encourage tobacco manufacturers to provide these products for free to women who are struggling to give up smoking during pregnancy, in particular.

I would also like to touch on the important issue of carbon monoxide monitoring. Challenges remain for staff in implementing the NICE guidance, particularly in relation to carbon monoxide screening. NICE has recommended since 2010 that pregnant women be screened for exposure to carbon monoxide. The current tobacco control plan reiterates the importance of that and further commits to recording women’s carbon monoxide levels in the maternity services dataset. However, front-line staff do not universally have access to carbon monoxide monitors.

We know already that babies who are exposed to carbon monoxide are more likely to suffer birth defects, to be born prematurely and to have a low birth weight, so it is incredibly important that we look at this area. Carbon monoxide screening is one of the key elements in supporting women who smoke to access quit services. Properly embedded into services, screening can transform outcomes. The evidence from the north-east shows that following a comprehensive programme to train midwives, provide them with monitors and set up referral routes to local quit smoking services, smoking in pregnancy rates fell by nearly a third. We know that this absolutely works.

I stress to the Minister that carbon monoxide monitors are not an optional extra; they are an essential tool for midwives. We would never ask midwives to do their jobs without, for example, blood pressure monitors. In the same way, all midwives should have access to CO monitors. Part of the problem is that there is no consistent national approach to the provision of these vital pieces of equipment. Local decisions determine whether midwives and health visitors have access to them, so there is local variation.

I would also like to touch on training for health professionals. The smoking in pregnancy challenge group, a coalition of health and baby charities, produced a report on securing this Back-Bench debate. The knowledge he brought to his opening speech set the tone for the debate.

To conclude, I very much welcome the new tobacco control plan and the commitments that the Minister and the Government have made in this area. Is there more that we can do? Yes, of course, there is much more that we can do. I know that the Minister, the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) are as passionate as I am about reducing our miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death rates.

I repeat, because it is really important, that this debate is not about demonising or criticising women who smoke during pregnancy. I fully appreciate how addictive smoking is; it is really hard to stop. Like my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham and for Harrow East, I have seen my parents struggle. They have both been smoke-free for many years, and I am very proud of them, but it is incredibly difficult.

When it comes to pregnancy, we know that all parents want to give their baby the best possible start in life, so I thank the Minister for all the work that he and the Department have done so far. I ask him to keep a watchful eye on this issue and to be pragmatic in ensuring that the Government give anyone who is struggling to quit smoking the tools and the support that they need to help them to achieve that goal.

1.48 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my friend the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). He highlighted, importantly, the dangers of pregnant women smoking, and he was very supportive of women who find themselves smoking during pregnancy. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) on securing this Back-Bench debate. The knowledge he brought to his opening speech set the tone for the debate.

I am pleased to take part in the debate because I am a member of the all-party group on e-cigarettes, and I believe that vaping is a safe and popular alternative to smoking. I have never smoked or vapéd. I am the oldest of five siblings, and none of us has ever been a smoker. I put that down to the fact that both my parents smoked all their lives, and smoking never held any charm or attraction for me or my brothers and sisters when we were young people.

Because my parents, other relatives and friends smoked, and I am married to someone who started smoking at the age of nine, I think I understand why people smoke and the impact it can have on their lives. When my parents started to smoke in the 1940s, people were not smoking in pregnancy, a majority have had no training in how to communicate those harms to women and support them effectively to access the treatment that is available. Health professionals say that, in the absence of training, they lack the confidence to engage in such conversations.

The report recommends that such training form a regular part of mandatory midwifery training and be embedded into obstetricians’ continuing professional development. Can the Minister outline the steps that are being taken to review and implement the findings of this report? Will consideration be given to extending the analysis undertaken by the smoking in pregnancy challenge group to look at training needs, involving key stakeholders such as other health professionals?

To conclude, I very much welcome the new tobacco control plan and the commitments that the Minister and the Government have made in this area. Is there more that we can do? Yes, of course, there is much more that we can do. I know that the Minister, the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) are as passionate as I am about reducing our miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death rates.

1.48 pm
fully aware of the dangers of smoking. Now, we all know that smoking can kill or cause serious lifelong illness. It makes me so sad to see so many young people starting to smoke.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned mouth cancer. That reminded me that I lost a colleague, who was in her early 60s, to mouth cancer, and only a year before she had seen her son, aged in his 40s, die of the same horrible disease, so I know how awful it can be.

Vaping is important as a safe alternative to smoking for people of all ages. I am pleased that for the first time the tobacco control plan focuses on vaping as a viable alternative to cigarettes. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley has said, independent studies by Public Health England and the Royal College of Physicians have recognised that vaping is at least 95% less harmful than smoking, and research by the University of St Andrews has found that the cancer risk from vaping is only 1% of that of smoking. Many other valid points have been made, and I agree with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that article 20 of the tobacco products directive, which conflates vaping products with tobacco products, should be reviewed, and that restrictions on advertising, packaging and product size should be lifted.

The commitment to support stop-smoking services is commendable, but in my experience—I undertook training to run smoking cessation sessions some years ago—it is very difficult for people diagnosed with diseases that might be smoke related to give up smoking. We all know that ill health can increase stress levels, so reliance on the habit at such a time can increase and it can be really tough to give up. Being able to switch to vaping for people in such situations is very welcome. I wish I had been able to recommend people, such as those who had had a heart attack, to switch to vaping when I was trying to help them to stop smoking, because those were difficult times for them.

I believe that the promotion of vaping and e-cigarettes is key to the Government achieving their vision of a smoke-free generation as part of the tobacco control plan. I support the view of the UK Vaping Industry Association that article 20 of the tobacco products directive, which conflates vaping products with tobacco products, should be reviewed, and that restrictions on advertising, packaging and product size should be lifted.

I do, however, have a warning for the Government. Much of the attraction of vaping is that, after the initial outlay for equipment, it proves a much cheaper way to enjoy the habit than smoking. I seek an assurance from the Government that they will ensure vaping always remains affordable, and that they will not be tempted to impose an excise tax that would force up prices and give smokers less reason to switch. Finally, I agree with colleagues that the Government must put their money where their mouth is if the tobacco control plan is to succeed.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon)? I am glad that vaping has been an assistance to her family, and that things are on the up from that point of view. May I also thank the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) for securing the debate? We have had a really important debate this afternoon. He raised some critical points, and I thank him for doing so.

May I also take this opportunity—I have not yet had such a chance—to welcome the Minister to his place? I know he is absolutely passionate about healthcare, and that he will bring to his role all the dedication and enthusiasm of someone who is in the lucky position of having a job that is also his passion. It is good that he will be responding to the debate.

I gave a lot of thought to how I would approach the debate. For a Conservative who generally takes the approach of pursuing individual liberty, there is perhaps some tension in favouring a control mechanism that takes away people’s individual choice. Some excellent points have been made, and two speeches in particular really nailed it. The first was by my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), who made the point that were tobacco discovered today, it is inconceivable that it would be freely available on the high street in the way that it is. It seems to me that that is an historical anomaly. The second was by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who spoke movingly about his parents’ deaths from cancer. I am very sorry to hear of that, but it really emphasises everything we are saying in the debate. Of course, we always have to balance the libertarian desire for freedom with the public health interest, and I hope that those two important points have really hit home with hon. Members.

I have spoken at length this week about healthcare in Oxfordshire, its future and my concerns about the way it has been managed. While we must always look at treatment—ensuring that we will one day find a cure for cancer, and in the meantime that we care for those who have cancer with every means at our disposal—we really must continue to fight. What I mean is that we must continue to decrease as much as possible the number of people who suffer cancer in the first place.

We are in the presence of some particularly cold and hard facts. The cost of having 7.3 million smokers is that smoking is the biggest killer. It is clearly identified and open to view as the biggest cause of cancer. It leads to more than 200 smoking-related deaths a day, or 16% of those who die. There are 79,000 deaths per annum—79,000 preventable deaths, 79,000 personal tragedies—to say nothing of the 20 times the number of people who, for every death, are suffering from preventable smoking-related conditions. It seems to me that there is an enormous emotional imperative: we must tackle smoking and the damage it causes.

If I have not persuaded hon. Members on an emotional level, let us just look at the hard economic facts. Smoking costs the economy £11 billion. There is a £2.5 billion cost to the NHS, with 474,000 hospital admissions. Let us just think what we could do for the NHS if we could divert that funding towards the cure of conditions that are not avoidable or preventable. There is a £4.3 billion
cost to employers, and a £4.1 billion cost to wider society, including the £760 million going to social care. Let us just think about how we could treat dementia or Alzheimer’s if we could direct the money from conditions that are preventable towards those that are not.

Moreover, not only is smoking a cost to the economy and a personal tragedy for those affected, but it is overwhelmingly targeted on the poorest. This health condition is actively feeding inequality: Children of smokers are two to three times more likely to be smokers themselves. The Prime Minister has spoken—very powerfully, in my view—of how the poorest are dying up to nine years earlier than the richest, and half those deaths are smoking related. This condition affects the poorest in society the most.

Surely the economic, moral and health arguments are overwhelming when it comes to the Government’s ambition of creating a smoke-free Britain. It is into that arena that the Government step with this plan.

The good news is, of course, that stopping smoking produces health benefits in months and it is easier, relatively speaking—I appreciate that it is not easy—to give up now than it ever has been. There is the technology. We have heard about the help given by vaping or e-cigarettes; last Stoptober, 53% of those who gave up did so with the assistance of e-cigarettes.

Happily, yes, the prevalence of smoking is declining more sharply than for many years, and this is where the tobacco control plan stands. The last one hugely exceeded expectations: the percentage of people smoking declined from more than 20% to 15%. I applaud the Government for taking forward bold, imaginative and forward-thinking measures as we tackle this public health crisis. The Government wish to reduce the inequality gap that I mentioned, get adult smoking rates down from 15.5% to about 12% and reduce the percentage of 15-year-olds who regularly smoke from 8% to 3%. That is so important, given that the early years govern people’s health choices for the rest of their lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and I spoke in the baby loss debate earlier this week; I mentioned that smoking was one cause of problems during pregnancy. I am glad that my hon. Friend brought that issue up again today. He is right to say that it is difficult to give up smoking. We are not being censorious in talking about pregnant women who smoke, but it would be much better for everybody if we reduced the proportion who do from 10% to 6%.

The Government are providing £16 billion for public health funding to local councils, which are best placed to marshal resources and help people in their areas. Perhaps most effective has been the mass media campaign. Many years ago now—it is a distant memory—the campaign against drink-driving started, and it has had an incredible effect in shaping public expectations. I am not suggesting that smoking is on the same level—there is a recklessness in drink-driving that is not so stark in smoking—but as my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham said, the issue is education and making it clear that someone is much more likely to hurt themselves and others if they continue to smoke.

I will not speak for much longer, but I want to make one or two brief further points. The first is that the Government propose a joined-up approach between local authorities and NHS England, which I encourage as it produces results. I am also encouraged by the “smokefree NHS” section of the plan—the NHS leading by example. I have discussed the impact on employers; the NHS is a large employer, so it is important that it should lead the way.

Lastly, I want to comment briefly on mental health. The NHS is leading the way as far as those using, working in or visiting the NHS are concerned, and the practice of escorting people from mental health hospitals on and off premises is due to end now that the health problems have been identified. Let us be clear: although 40.5% of people with serious mental health difficulties do smoke, they want to stop smoking just as everybody else does. I hugely encourage that. This is an example of the Government’s taking an approach to mental health in the round. Yesterday, I asked the Prime Minister about help given to military personnel, but this is another example of how to ensure that the issue is not just addressed in only one silo of society.

Thank you for letting me speak for a little while, Madam Deputy Speaker. Like the British Heart Foundation and Action on Smoking and Health, I welcome the plan enormously. It builds on recent Government work on tackling smoking. The proposals are ambitious and bold, and I ask everyone to support the Government’s plan to create a smoke-free generation.

2.4 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) on bringing this debate to the main Chamber, on enabling an important conversation about the coming of smoke-free Britain, and on the long-term work he has done on this issue. I welcome my neighbour, the public health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine); I applaud his progress and focus on this issue and encourage him to be as ambitious as possible.

Many colleagues will be aware that I am passionate about trying to keep fit and healthy, although serving in the House precludes much of that, and about working to reduce heart conditions among people of all ages. It should come as no surprise that I very much welcome the Government’s new tobacco control plan. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on arrhythmias. I could not be more passionate about these issues. Smoking claims more than 200 lives per day in England. Think of how many lives we are losing from preventable causes. We have also heard about the £11 billion cost to the economy.

Last November, I held the parliamentary reception for carers’ rights day and I shall do the same next week; the long-term impact of this issue really concerns me. Like many Members, I am not here to lecture; we are all sympathetic and we have been measured in our comments. I believe in choice, but more importantly in education and understanding the real impact on families and our NHS. We simply know that smoke-free is best.

I know first hand what the addiction can do to long-term health and quality of life. As we have heard today, we simply would not allow a smoking culture to start growing today so we cannot ignore the challenge it has left us. Smoking has blighted my life—sadly, it can
[Mims Davies]

blight relationships and families all too often. Like many, my mum became a smoker in the late ’50s to stay slim and attractive and avoid putting on weight. It was fashionable, and the reality of its impact on health was simply never understood. She could never, ever give up: it was the first, the last, the everything—an addiction and a habit. She always said, “I wouldn’t know what to do with my hands; I’ve tried knitting!”

E-cigarettes did help, but we were unclear at the time whether they were better or worse. There was great help from GPs, including hypnosis, gum, tablets, lozenges, wands—you name it; it did not work. My dad smoked heavily throughout his life, although to be honest he enjoyed all the so-called good stuff as well. But it all resulted in my being a sandwich carer, with young children and older parents on whose health smoking had taken its toll. Both my parents died in their early 70s from smoking-related heart issues—both before my 40th birthday, and both before I came to this place. They did not have a chance to see their grandchildren grow up, as happens in many families as a result of smoking.

Alongside our transformative success on smoking in public places is further good news: back in October 2015, smoking in cars with children was banned and that was also transformative. But there is also bad news—how often do we see people in work vehicles flouting smoking rules? Air pollution is having a growing impact on our mindset. We need to make sure that people are doing what is safe at work. Earlier this week, I was at a British Lung Foundation event highlighting its Breathe Easy campaign, which I applaud.

The 2011 and 2015 tobacco control plans had those successes and should be applauded—adult smoking rates are down almost 5% over that period—but we must continue to be bold. I am so pleased about the Government’s new plan. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), action is essential: just saying that we have made some progress is not good enough.

By 2022, the Government expect to reduce the smoking rate to 12% or less, reduce the prevalence of smoking in pregnancy by almost half, and permit innovative technologies. We all know about vape shops and the prevalence of vaping on our high streets. It cannot be ignored and we must research it. I do not want, 20 or 30 years down the road, to have on our hands the results of thinking it was the new messiah when it was not. However, it may be, so let us do the research.

As a strong supporter of and believer in the excellent work of the British Heart Foundation, including in my constituency, I thank it for all it does. Public Health England tells me that since 2014 there are still about 20,000 smokers in Eastleigh. I welcome the previous Chancellor’s announcement of £2 million for the British Heart Foundation for the replacement of local defibrillators. I would like the Government to help with work on an app, so we know where those defibrillators are. The former Chancellor made the announcement because his constituent, Fabrice Muamba, survived only because of a defibrillator. Let us legislate to have them on planes as well—they cost about £700. My constituents Graham and Anne Hunter have seen the benefits of defibrillators. After losing their daughter, Claire Reed, they would absolutely welcome both the app and the defibrillators. It was as a result of them talking to the Chancellor that the £2 million was provided.

I welcome the Government’s plans to seek to reduce smoking among those with mental health conditions. We know that the most deprived and challenged will always be the most dependent. Those in a lower paid job are, sadly, still more likely to smoke or, more importantly, to stay a smoker. I stress to the Minister the importance of tackling the health inequality of this particular group in driving the next phase forward.

I congratulate the Government on their bold vision for a smoke-free generation and I look forward to further progress. All the lives we can save, and all the resources we can save, are absolutely worth it.

2.12 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): With your kind permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, as a Scottish MP I hope to make a short contribution to the debate on a tobacco control plan for England. I shall make some reference to the situation in Scotland, to highlight the cost of smoking in human suffering and death, as well as the cost impact on public health budgets and the overall economy. I welcome the debate on this vitally important matter and congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) on securing it. I also applaud the Backbench Business Committee for granting the time.

The tobacco control plan builds on the successes of the previous control plan, established by the coalition Government, and aims to herald a smoke-free generation—I say that while recognising that much yet needs to be done. I wholeheartedly support the principle of preventative spending on early intervention, which can prevent negative health outcomes later in life. I also welcome the investment in tackling ill health and recognise that it has the potential to save a significant amount of public spending in the long term and can help to reduce health inequalities. I do not underestimate the power of addiction. For that reason, I feel that where there is a will to stop smoking we should do everything possible to help people to help themselves.

I welcome recent falls in the number of adults who smoke in England and Scotland, and the number of children exposed to second-hand smoke. However, smoking rates in Scotland are still higher than in England, and we must be prepared to do much more to reduce this figure. Currently in Scotland, tobacco use is linked to 10,000 deaths a year.

On e-cigarettes, I am a firm supporter of having a robust regulatory framework, which ensures all devices are safe and acknowledges their potential use in smoking-cessation programmes. I welcome the fact that earlier this year the Scottish Parliament voted to ban the sale of e-cigarettes to under-18s and to limit advertising, moves I fully support because they will protect the health of our young people.

On the tobacco control plan for England, I acknowledge that the previous plan reduced adult smoking rates in England from 20.1% to 15.5%. That is indeed progress. I also applaud the ambition in the plan to reduce adult smoking rates from 15.5% to 12% or less by 2022. It is welcome that the plan is supported by the British Heart Foundation, which recognises it as an important tool in reducing the rate of strokes and heart disease. I compliment
the Government on the fact that the World Health Organisation has designated England as one of the best places in the world to give up smoking. The strategy is based on a joined-up approach between the NHS, the Department of Health and local government. That can only be good, too.

I welcome the ambition of the plan to reduce the number of 15-year-olds who regularly smoke from 8% to 3% of less; reduce the smoking rates among adults in England to 12% or less; reduce the inequality gap in smoking prevalence between those in lower paid, routine and manual occupations, and those in higher paid professional and managerial occupations; and reduce the prevalence of smoking in pregnancy from 10.7% to 6% or less. I also applaud making all mental health in-patient service sites smoke-free by 2018, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). It has been a source of frustration for me for many years, as I am sure it has been for other Members, to visit hospitals for various reasons and find people congregated around the entrances, often having been escorted there by health workers who I am sure would prefer to be doing more productive things. I also welcome the ambition of permitting innovative technologies than minimise the risk of harm and maximise the availability of safer alternatives to smoking.

I hope we all support the idea of creating a smoke-free generation without any reservation. Effectively enforcing existing legislation on proxy purchasing and standardised packaging to reduce the uptake of smoking among young people is a very noble objective. Supporting pregnant smokers to quit, which will undoubtedly increase the life prospects of children yet unborn, and reviewing the sanctions for retailers who consistently break the law designated to protect young people from smoking, is welcome. As the right hon. Member for Rother Valley mentioned in his opening speech, in 2016 it was estimated that 2 million people had used e-cigarettes and had completely stopped smoking—that must be very good news—while at the time a further 470,000 were using them as an aid to quit.

In 2013, the Scottish Government introduced a five-year tobacco control strategy entitled “Creating a Tobacco-free Generation”. It set the target to reduce smoking prevalence in Scotland to 5% or less by 2034—again, a very ambitious and welcome target. The strategy set out a range of measures to support young people to choose not to smoke, to protect children and all people from second-hand smoke, and to continue to support those who do smoke to quit. Actions taken by the Scottish Parliament in recent years to control tobacco, and to limit and tackle the harm caused by tobacco, include legislation to prohibit smoking in public places, which came into effect in March 2006; raising the age of sale for tobacco from 16 to 18 in 2007; implementation of a tobacco retail register in 2011; a ban on self-service sales from vending machines in 2013; and the introduction of a tobacco display ban in shops from 2013.

I turn now to the impact of smoking. According to Scottish Government statistics, tobacco use in Scotland is associated with more than 10,000 deaths and about 125,000 hospital admissions every year. According to the Office for National Statistics, the smoking prevalence in Scotland among over-16s was 17.7% in 2016—an estimated 942,644 smokers—compared with the UK-wide smoking prevalence of 15.8%. Smoking prevalence in Scotland fell between 2003 and 2013 but has remained fairly static since. Some 35% of adults in the most-deprived quintile of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation smoke compared with 11% in the least-deprived quintile.

According to ASH Scotland, on average lifelong smokers die about 10 years sooner than non-smokers. The estimated cost to the NHS in Scotland alone is £323 million. According to the Scottish Public Health Observatory, for every 1 percentage point by which smoking prevalence is reduced, the NHS could save £13.4 million. One last set of numbers underlines the cost of smoking: ASH Scotland estimates that smoking costs Scotland around £1.1 billion annually, including £271 million in healthcare costs, £692 million in productivity losses due to active smoking, £60 million in productivity losses due to passive smoking, £34 million in clearing smoking-related litter and £12 million in fires caused by smoking in commercial properties.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): As an ex-smoker who went cold turkey many years ago, I agree with most of what has been said. Like many others, however, I come from a family where parents and grandparents smoked. I welcome all measures to help people to stop smoking. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need more investment in prevention, not least through public health budgets, but that those are now in the hands of local authorities, the cuts to which have been abominable over the years? Does he agree that more money needs to be invested in public health?

Stephen Kerr: I note in the plan the £16 billion commitment to funding public health programmes, in conjunction with local authorities in England, which is surely welcome news.

Bob Blackman: Just to reiterate, although it is local authorities that spend the money to help people give up smoking, which is warmly welcome, the savings go directly to the health service, and so the money is not recycled back to those helping people to stop smoking to meet the considerable expense incurred.

Stephen Kerr: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and his moving and impactful contribution earlier.

Bob Blackman: Behind the numbers on lives and costs, there is above all else the human suffering and the suffering of the families who lose family members to this terrible disease. I welcome any and all efforts to help people across the UK stop smoking.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) for securing this important debate on the tobacco control plan for England. I congratulate him on his work over the years and, as a testament to that, on the general consensus today.

Scotland has its own strong tobacco control strategy. The Scottish Government have implemented and overseen a number of progressive actions on smoking, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for listing many of them, which shows the strength of the consensus in the Chamber to which I referred. Record investment in NHS Scotland on smoking cessation services has helped hundreds of thousands of people to
quit smoking, and our aim is to create a tobacco-free generation by 2034. Last year, the Scottish Parliament celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the smoking ban and welcomed comments from the World Health Organisation praising our excellent example of global public health leadership.

Not everything that we want to achieve can be done in isolation, however. A good example of something that required UK-wide co-operation was the introduction of standardised packaging for tobacco products. However, I want to focus on another area that requires co-ordination across the jurisdictions of the UK, and indeed of Europe and the world: the illicit tobacco trade. I press the Minister to report on progress to secure a Europe-wide traceability system, which is still being discussed at the European Commission, and to confirm that the UK Government will rapidly ratify the illicit trade protocol, the first subsidiary treaty under the WHO framework convention on tobacco control.

Illicit tobacco undermines public health policy because it makes tobacco products available at a low price and often in branded packaging. It damages public revenue because it reduces the take from tobacco taxation. Figures from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for 2015-16 estimated that the illicit market share in the UK for cigarettes was 13%, with the figure for hand-rolling tobacco 32%. The tobacco tax gap in that period was estimated at £2.4 billion, so clearly the illicit trade undermines our tobacco control strategy.

The involvement of the major tobacco manufacturers in the illicit trade is a major concern. Their involvement is evidenced by the fact that their genuine products—not counterfeit ones, or so-called cheap whites—form the largest share of the illicit market. The Scottish Government have committed to continue to support strong national and local alliances to tackle illicit tobacco. In 2009, the enhanced tobacco sales enforcement programme was introduced to enable the Scottish Government and trading standards officers throughout Scotland to work with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to tackle the availability of illicit cigarettes and their sale to people under 18.

As we all know, there is an open border between England and Scotland, and if the amount of illicit tobacco rises in England, it will affect Scotland, as well as Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland needs a commitment from the UK Government that they will ensure that local authorities in England are adequately resourced to conduct the fight against the illicit trade. At present, that is absolutely not what we appear to have.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. Does he concede that the tobacco companies themselves deliberately overproduce products for certain countries, knowing that they will be brought into the UK by illicit means and sold as illicit products? The tobacco companies themselves have a key role in this.

Martyn Day: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The tobacco companies are indeed the villains in this scenario.

For the last 20 years, the UK has had an effective and well-resourced anti-smuggling strategy, and HMRC’s tax gap estimates have fallen by about a half since the peak in 2000, but there is every reason to fear that that success is under serious threat and that the progressive reductions in the market share of illicit tobacco may soon go into reverse. That is already suggested by recent small upicks in HMRC’s figures.

There is a specific problem for local authorities. Figures from the Chartered Trading Standards Institute published at the end of last year showed that the total budget for trading standards across Great Britain had fallen from £213 million in 2009 to only £124 million in 2016, and that the number of trading standards staff had fallen by more than half. That means that the chance of catching someone selling illicit tobacco or supplying it to an unscrupulous retailer or local consumers is significantly reduced. Information from local enforcement action can be used to help to track the supply chain, and less information means less tracking and intelligence, which cannot be in the interests of either public health or the public finances.

I urge the UK Government to make rapid further progress at the European and international level. The EU’s revised tobacco products directive establishes a new traceability system for all tobacco packaging, and that requires a coding system that can be accessed by enforcement officers to give information about the movement of products through the supply chain from manufacturer to retailer—this addresses the point made by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). The system also requires security features to prevent tampering and ensure that products are genuine.

The European Commission has been carrying out consultations and research on the system’s specifications. While I consider its current proposals to be largely constructive and sensible, there are tobacco industry systems that the manufacturers are desperate to see states adopt to implement the directive requirements. The coding system developed by the four major manufacturers is known as Codentify, although it has now been hived off to a nominally independent company. In my opinion, it does not fulfil the requirement for independence in the protocol to eliminate illicit trade in tobacco products. That protocol explicitly requires Governments to take responsibility for control measures, rather than relying on industry self-regulation, which has clearly failed to deliver in the past. I therefore ask the Minister to confirm that the UK Government intend to participate in the European traceability system, and also to state clearly that they will work to ensure that its specifications include robust requirements for independence from the tobacco industry. The industry must not control the traceability system, either directly or indirectly through proxies.

A global tracking and tracing system is offered by the World Health Organisation’s illicit trade protocol, which was rightly negotiated as the first subsidiary treaty under the framework convention on tobacco control. The EU system will have to be consistent with the protocol, but it is obvious that a working global system would be even more effective than one that is confined to the EU. The protocol also contains other important provisions on control of the tobacco supply chain, including the requirement for manufacturers to conduct due diligence with their customers and to keep proper records of their transactions.

The UK Government have stated that they will become a party to the protocol on numerous occasions, including in their new tobacco control plan, and I welcome those statements, but they are yet to do so. I ask the Minister...
to give a clear commitment that the UK Government will move rapidly to ratify the protocol. A date for ratification would be excellent. It certainly needs to happen before 10 July 2018, which is the deadline if the UK is to be able to participate in the first meeting of the parties in October 2018 in Geneva.

Like others who have spoken, I welcome the tobacco control plan for England. It is not perfect, but it does represent a real commitment to tackling the smoking epidemic. I trust that it will also strengthen co-operation with the Scottish Government, as well as the Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments, in addressing this No. 1 public health priority. However, the approach still needs to be strengthened and supplemented, and action against illicit trade is at the top of my “to do” list.

I very much hope that the Minister will be able to make the commitments that I have called for today, along with other Members on both sides of the House, and I look forward to the arrival of the first truly smoke-free generation throughout the United Kingdom.

2.32 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) for securing the debate. He is a long-standing campaigner on the issue of tobacco and its effects on society, and it is good to see that he is continuing his campaign. He made an insightful and thought-provoking contribution.

I also thank other Members who have made excellent speeches on this important issue, including the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), and the hon. Members for Witney (Robert Courts), for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr).

I welcome the fact that the debate is taking place during Stoptober. It is nearly a year since our last debate on the tobacco control plan, which—this may interest some Members—marked my first outing as shadow Minister for public health. While the Minister I shadow has now changed—it is now the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine)—the most significant change since our last debate is that, thanks to him, we finally have a new, updated tobacco control plan, which we were all very pleased to see. It is welcome that, after a long-drawn-out 18-month delay, we now have a plan that will take us a step further towards creating a smoke-free society.

Labour Members have welcomed the plan and its ambitious and noble goals, but we remain concerned about how it will be effectively implemented and achieved, especially given the short-sighted cuts in public health budgets, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South highlighted knowledgeably in his excellent speech. As we know, the previous plan was extremely successful and reduced smoking rates from 20.2% to 15.5% but, as we have heard from every speaker today, it remains the case that smoking is still a serious issue in our society in terms of both its financial and human cost. Smoking and its related health problems cost our already financially strapped NHS more than £2.5 billion each year. If we were to seriously address smoking in society, we could reduce that financial cost and direct the money towards improving our NHS and ensuring that we have a healthy society.

It is estimated that 200 people a day die from smoking-related illnesses. In 2015, 79,100 people aged just 35 or over died because of smoking. It is not just adults who are affected, but babies and children. In 2010, as a result of pregnant women smoking, 19,000 babies were born with a low birth weight and an increased chance of taking up smoking later in their lives. As we heard in the excellent speech made by the hon. Member for Colchester, last week was Baby Loss Awareness Week. The hon. Gentleman is co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, of which I am proud to be an officer. It is estimated that up to 5,000 miscarriages, 300 perinatal deaths and around 2,200 premature births each year are attributed to smoking during pregnancy. Those saddening and distressing figures show exactly why we are here today to debate this issue and to ensure that the tobacco control plan is as effective as possible so that we can achieve a smoke-free society, and, in particular, support women during pregnancy.

We also know that smoking rates remain persistently high, especially among people with mental health issues, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley mentioned. The plan sets out various recommendations relating to mental health, including improving support for smokers with mental health conditions and training for mental health staff to help to reduce smoking among that group, but I should like to hear from the Minister exactly what measures have been taken on the basis of those recommendations.

It is equally worrying that, as a number of Members have pointed out, the level of smoking remains high among those who are unemployed or members of lower socioeconomic groups, especially given the estimate that tobacco was 27% less affordable in 2016 than it was in 2006. There are a host of reasons for that, including the tax on tobacco products. I agree with the hon. Member for Chippenham that we should never seek to reduce that tax, for all the reasons that she gave, but it is deeply worrying that those groups, for whom poverty is rife, are not being sufficiently helped to quit smoking. During last year’s debate, I cited figures that showed that if smoking were reduced among those living in poverty and the costs of smoking to them were reinvested, we could make serious progress towards the eradication of poverty. Will the Minister give us an idea of what consideration he has given to the idea that reducing smoking could be a vehicle for ending poverty in society?

There is a clear drive in the plan for action on smoking cessation to be taken at a more local level. We do not disagree with that; in fact, we welcome it. We all agree that a “one size fits all” approach does not work, because of the geographical variations when it comes to smoking in our society. In my own region of the north-east of England, smoking rates are 25% higher than those in the south-west, and it is therefore unsurprising that the prevalence of lung cancer in the north-east is close to double that in the south-west. This is why it is important for us to do more at a local level to reduce smoking. However, I must urge the Minister—I know that he takes these matters very seriously—to bear in mind that “localising” action does not mean abdicating responsibility at a national level.
I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) on securing this important debate. The Backbench Business Committee was an excellent innovation that arrived in this House at the same time as me—there is no correlation between those two things, I should point out—and debates such as this would not necessarily have happened without it. So well done to the right hon. Gentleman, and to all the Members who have participated. As the shadow Minister said, it is Stoptober, which is an excellent time to have this debate, but of course our passion to cut back on smoking rates is not confined to October.

Let me say a bit about the tobacco control plan and try to respond, as far as I can, to the points raised in the debate. My ministerial brief covers a wide area: public health, primary care, and cancer. That might appear to be a disparate agenda, but there is a plan. For me, all of my responsibilities come back to prevention and in particular how we prevent some of the major diseases; cancer is, of course, still the biggest preventable killer in our country, and the link to smoking is obvious and has been given by many Members. To give some obvious examples, our work to tackle the harmful use of alcohol, our strategy to tackle obesity and specifically childhood obesity, and our tobacco control plan are all about doing more to prevent ill health in our country, and above all cancer.

The TCP is not an end in itself; it is part of a plan. The shadow Minister kindly said that publishing it was down to me. At our very first health orals, she asked when it would be published, and I gave the answer that it would be published by the summer recess. She then shouted out, “Which summer recess?”, but the plan had been started and I wanted to get it right and to get it out. It is amazing what announcing things at oral questions will do to our officials. Anyway, we got it out, and I am very pleased with it.

The last TCP ran from 2011 to 2015 and was considered highly successful; I am grateful to the many Members from all parties for saying that. All the ambitions we set have been given by many Members. To give some obvious figures, and we are now considered by independent experts to have the best tobacco control measures in Europe. We published the Tobacco Control Plan 19 OCTOBER 2017.

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The TCP is not an end in itself; it is part of a plan. The shadow Minister kindly said that publishing it was down to me. At our very first health orals, she asked when it would be published, and I gave the answer that it would be published by the summer recess. She then shouted out, “Which summer recess?”, but the plan had been started and I wanted to get it right and to get it out. It is amazing what announcing things at oral questions will do to our officials. Anyway, we got it out, and I am very pleased with it.

The last TCP ran from 2011 to 2015 and was considered highly successful; I am grateful to the many Members from all parties for saying that. All the ambitions we set have been given by many Members. To give some obvious figures, and we are now considered by independent experts to have the best tobacco control measures in Europe. We published the Tobacco Control Plan 19 OCTOBER 2017.
new plan this year to build on that success, but there is no room for putting ourselves on the back in this game, and we still have a huge amount to do.

We still have 7.3 million smokers. That exerts a huge impact on our communities and our NHS. Tobacco use is the biggest contributor to cancer, accounting for more than one in four UK cancer deaths, and nearly a fifth of all cancer cases in this country. Research by the Independent Cancer Taskforce reported that up to two thirds of long-term smokers will die as a result of smoking if they do not quit. We have heard from a number of Members across the House about people whom they have loved and lost, and they are not statistics; they are people’s mothers and fathers, and sons and daughters, who have been lost to cancer. Cancer is not contracted through smoking alone, of course, although it accounts for a huge part of the cancer rate. We must remember that 200 people die every day due to smoking; I think every Member will join me in saying I want us to do better than that.

The plan sets our interim ambitions en route to that goal. Over the next five years we want to reduce the prevalence of adult smokers to 12%. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), I would like to go lower than that, but that is the current figure in the plan. It is not necessarily an end-point, however, and it is not an end in itself. We should also remember the prevalence of 15-year-olds who regularly smoke. We want to get that down to 3%, and the prevalence of pregnant smokers—which so many Members have mentioned today—down to 6%. We want to reduce the burning injustice—a number of Members have used that term today—that sees some of the poorest in our society die on average nine years earlier than the richest, so we will focus, as the plan says, on people in routine and manual occupations.

We want to focus on other groups particularly affected by smoking, such as people with mental health conditions and those in prisons. The hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) rightly spoke about that being part of a wider poverty reduction programme. That has to be central to the plan, which is not just owned by the Department of Health and me. It is a cross-governmental plan and everything that we do should be part of that aim to reduce poverty. That is why the Prime Minister said what she did. I guess that the hon. Gentleman does not agree with her words on the steps of Downing Street about poverty reduction.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): The statistics in some of our cities are much higher than in others. In my city of Bradford, the Minister will know that the figure for smoking prevalence is about 22%. Public health is so important; does he recognise the importance of giving more resources to public health and councils, which have experienced significant cuts in recent years?

Steve Brine: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman, who has not been present for the debate, that that point has been made. I also point out that we are giving £16 billion of ring-fenced public health spending to councils in England, which is significant. However, I shall come back to his point if he will bear with me.

To achieve the ambitions in the plan, we need to recognise that smoking is increasingly prevalent in particular groups in society and in particular areas. That is why we need to shift the emphasis from national to local action, and support smokers, particularly in disadvantaged groups, to quit. Now is not the time for more legislation—we have done that bit. I do not rule it out forever, but successive Governments have done that part. Now is the time to redouble our efforts to focus on our top priority groups such as pregnant women, young people and people with mental illnesses. We must focus on the people and areas with the greatest need.

Let me give an example. Yesterday, we published the two-years-on plan from the national cancer taskforce, which looks at the cancer strategy. It is full of good case studies. One that especially struck me was the Manchester lung cancer project, whereby we screen people arriving at supermarkets in certain parts of Manchester. That has led to improved cancer detection and outcomes for the local community that are quite staggering. Why do that in Manchester and not in Hampshire—in Winchester in my constituency? That is because there is a high prevalence of lung cancer driven by smoking in the Greater Manchester area. I visited Macmillan’s headquarters in London and sat and listened to some callers on their support line. I asked about regional disparities and they said that when they got calls from that part of England, they were about lung cancer, and that is no coincidence.

The example I gave is a policy response from the Greater Manchester authority, led by Andy Burnham, formerly of this parish, who has already put in place a plan that will mean 115,000 fewer smokers by 2021. I pay tribute to Andy, with whom I worked a lot in the House through my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer. I know that he has been greatly affected by that, and he is great partner for us on this matter. That is exactly the kind of thing we meant when we said in the tobacco control plan that we wanted local areas to develop their own local strategies.

There are many other good schemes locally—for example, the Fresh programme operates in a dozen local authorities in the north-east. I wonder whether the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) is aware of it. She made an excellent personal speech, and I congratulate her on managing not to turn into a smoker, given the family background that she described. All the evidence suggests that children who grow up in families where the parents smoke go on to do so. The hon. Lady clearly knows something that we do not.

Leicester provides great examples of innovative stop smoking services, and the right hon. Member for Rother Valley mentioned Leicester and namechecked the council officer, who I suspect will keep that Hansard report. Well done to Leicester.

I recognise that hon. Members are concerned about local stop smoking services, but as I said in response to an intervention, we have a £16 billion ring-fenced public health budget. The Government believe that local authorities are best placed to make decisions on how the services should be prioritised to meet the needs of their populations. That is why I gave the example from Manchester. I am many things, but I am not best placed to decide what works in Leicester or Manchester; locally elected politicians are best placed.

The Government will continue to publish data that help local people hold those locally elected leaders to account. That is a crucial part of the plan. Public Health England, for which I am responsible, will continue to
[Steve Brine]

offer support to local authorities to help them develop their local approaches in the most cost-effective and evidence-based way. As Minister, I will continue to be a passionate advocate for evidence-based tobacco control plan policy making. It is an integral part of my mission to reduce the toll of preventable cancers.

I want to say something about the Government’s approach to e-cigarettes, which almost every Member who spoke mentioned. The new control plan commits to monitoring the safety, uptake, impact and effectiveness of e-cigarettes and so-called novel tobacco products. We must find a better term than that. The plan charges Public Health England with the responsibility of including messages about the relative safety of e-cigarettes in their quit smoking campaigns. I am pleased to say that that is already under way and that PHE’s current Stoptober campaign, for the first time, highlights e-cigarettes among the array of tools that smokers can use to improve their chances of quitting successfully.

As we like to say during Stoptober, there has never been a better time to quit. I will leave to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor the several Budget submissions around e-cigarettes. The suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) of providing free e-cigarettes to pregnant women who are smokers is certainly worthy of consideration. I noted that the hon. Member for North Tyneside is not necessarily a fan of e-cigarettes and so-called novel tobacco products. [Interruption.] I think I need to wind up by 3 o’clock, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is that right? [Interruption.] “Well by,” she says. Okay, let me conclude by thanking everyone who has spoken today. I particularly enjoyed the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). It was hypnotic in many ways but very good, and I noted her Budget submission. As usual, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, although I suspect that his berating me on this subject will not have started and ended today. The hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) made a consistent point about local authority pension schemes, and it must be for local authorities to make such decisions and then answer to members of the scheme, their elected members and, of course, the residents who elect them and get to make such decisions every day.

In closing, I appreciate the many challenges and I appreciate the support that the House has given to tobacco control legislation over many years. It is now up to us to provide a national lead and to support our local authorities and ensure that they carry through what is in the plan. I thank my friend the right hon. Member for Rother Valley for introducing today’s debate and ensuring that tobacco control is no longer a partisan issue; this is now about the tobacco control plan.

2.58 pm

Sir Kevin Barron: I just have a few reflections. Several people mentioned my involvement in anti-tobacco measures in this Chamber over many years, but it was never just me. Whether sat on the Opposition or Government Benches, I had allies on the other side who forced different Governments to take different positions all the time. Listening to the debate, we have now reached a consensus. We started off by banning tobacco advertising and promotion, then smoking in public places, then point of sale advertising and now we have standardised packaging. It has been just wonderful to sit here and recognise the fact that we now know what is in our midst, shortening the lives of many tens of thousands of our fellow citizens, and we are now seriously doing something about it. I say to the Minister—if I was on the Government Benches, I would say the same—that I do not see any need for further legislation. We need to implement what we have already done on smoking cessation to help people break this habit. I am thankful for what was said about me, but it is not just me; there have been teams of people at different times.

It has been really good today that we have recognised the new products on the market, such as e-cigarettes and other novel products—I think “novel” is a European term that has come in from the tobacco product directive. No matter who owns them and no matter who is promoting them, people now recognise that such products can potentially be very useful in getting citizens off this killer—tobacco shortens the life of 50% of those who use it. We need the research, and we need to be determined.

I enjoyed all the Front-Bench speeches, and I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) that I loved the parliamentary Labour party brief I received last night—I cannot always say that when I talk about tobacco products or tobacco policy in this House. We now need to make sure that we improve things for our fellow citizens as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Government’s publication of the new Tobacco control plan.
Valproate and Foetal Anticonvulsant Syndrome

3 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that there has been a systemic failure to inform women of the dangers of taking the epilepsy drug sodium valproate during pregnancy, resulting in thousands of children being born with congenital malformations, disabilities and developmental disorders since the 1970s as a result of fetal exposure to the drug; welcomes the launch of the Valproate Toolkit by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency in February 2016 to ensure that women are informed of the potential risks of the drug, but further notes with concern a recent survey which found that 68 per cent of women have still not received these safety warnings; calls on the Government to take immediate steps to ensure that the materials in the Valproate Toolkit are distributed to all prescribing clinicians, pharmacists, and women who are being prescribed the drug; calls on the Government to require all clinicians prescribing sodium valproate to women and girls of childbearing age to discuss annually with the patient, the risks during pregnancy before a prescription is renewed; and further calls on the Government to bring forward proposals for a care plan and financial assistance to the victims of sodium valproate in pregnancy and their families.

I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on getting through this debate’s catchy title.

I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee, on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on valproate and other anti-epileptic drugs in pregnancy, for facilitating this debate. I also pay tribute to Janet Williams and Emma Murphy, who are present today. They have fought tirelessly on this cause over many years, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude.

It is fair to say that “scandal” is an overused word in political discourse, but it is appropriate in this case: a family who have suffered as a result of a mother taking valproate in pregnancy would regard it as an absolute scandal, and we need to treat it in that way. There are many similarities to the thalidomide scandal. A group of women, over many years, took a drug during pregnancy without knowing the risks, with awful consequences, and we owe them a duty—that is the important point.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman for not being able to stay for the whole debate.

I, too, pay tribute to Janet and Emma for the campaign they have run. This debate is a great tribute to their efforts. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the real scandal is that we have known about the problems with this drug since the 1960s, but, as he says, expectant women were not told? The Government and the pharmaceutical industry knew there were dangers.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I completely agree with her. Interestingly, the original product licence in March 1974 stated this, way back then: “In women of child bearing age, it should only be used in severe cases or those resistant to other treatments.”

They knew in the ’70s, yet the appalling scandal is that so many women since then have had their life turned completely upside down, with enormous consequences for their children, because they were not told.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): My constituent Nicola took sodium valproate through her pregnancy, and her son has chronic fatigue. The impact on her family is immense and expensive. We have fought for, and managed to secure, medical support for her through hospitals in Manchester, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there needs to be a Government fund to ensure that victims have such support, rather than having to rely on their own means?

Norman Lamb: I completely agree. I will make the case a little later, but it seems unanswerable and the Government need to reflect on that.

What happened was worse than just the neglect of not telling women. The minutes from the 18 July 1973 meeting of the sub-committee on adverse reactions, a sub-committee of the Committee on Safety of Medicines, have been uncovered. That document reveals a real outrage, because it talks about keeping the information from women—deliberately withholding it “especially as it could give rise to fruitless anxiety.”

It continued: “Nevertheless, they thought it would be best if prescribers were all made aware of the nature of the evidence and recommended that a statement similar to that proposed by ICI”—in respect of another product—“could be included in all relevant data sheets but not on package inserts so that there would be no danger of patients themselves seeing it.”

That is extraordinary.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Would the right hon. Gentleman share my great disappointment if the original documents were to go missing from the archive while these debates and this campaign are ongoing?

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Issues such as this are of enormous concern and this raises the question whether there needs to be some sort of inquiry or Hillsborough-style panel to look at exactly how it has happened. However, it is important that we focus on the top priority, which is ensuring that women get told, that this drug is not used inappropriately and that a compensation package of some sort is put in place.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given what the right hon. Gentleman has said, is it not even more extraordinary that, even now, this information and these warnings are not getting through effectively to pregnant women and their families? My constituent David Tout’s son has been affected by this, as have 20,000 children across the country in every one of our constituencies. There is no sense of urgency from the MHRA—Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency—or from the Government.

Norman Lamb: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that, and he is right in what he says; I, too, feel that there is a sense of inertia. For goodness’ sake, for as long as women are not getting told about this, more such babies are being born. That is the awful horror of this.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Many of us in the House have been approached by constituents or groups about several of these drug scandals, which represent a paternalistic time, when the patient was not part of a team in an open discussion with the doctor. I am sure there are many of these, so should they be looked at together, as the principles of them all are the same?
Norman Lamb: That is a profound comment to make and it reflects a changing attitude and culture; it is thankfully now less paternalistic than it was. However, elements of it remain and we need to keep fighting against that. The hon. Lady makes a good point: this relates to other products, too.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) rose—

Norman Lamb: I will take this intervention and then I sought to make progress.

Cat Smith: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of research done by the Independent Fetal Anti Convulsant Trust—In-FACT—which found that up to 400 babies affected by valproate have been born since the toolkit was launched in February 2016?

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Lady for the intervention. I am aware of that figure and again it is shocking. It makes the point that this is a continuing scandal, not something from the dim and distant past.

Since the 1970s, more information has emerged bit by bit. In 2000, the information given to patients was changed to refer to the warning, but it took until then for anything to emerge. In 2003, Sanofi made an addition to this, and an interesting question is whether it downplayed the risk. That is one point that raises the question whether some sort of panel investigation needs to take place. In 2005, Sanofi said on its warnings to patients:

“Some babies born to mothers who took Epilim during pregnancy may develop less quickly than normal and may require additional educational support”. That is putting it at its mildest, because the implications were far more serious. The question is, did it know then? These things need to be investigated further.

It is important to state what the risks are. Among the general population there is a 2% to 3% risk of foetal abnormality. If valproate is taken during pregnancy, that risk rises to 11%, and possible defects include spina bifida; malformations of the face, including cleft palate; malformations of the skull, limbs and organs, including the heart; and respiratory issues. It is incredibly important not to disregard the fact that when people take valproate during pregnancy there is also a 30% to 40% risk of developmental problems, including life-changing issues such as poor speech and language skills, delayed walking and talking, behavioural problems, interaction and communication issues, low intellectual abilities, memory problems, noise sensitivity, sensory issues, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorders. The consequences are incalculable. It is estimated that 20,000 babies have been affected since the 1970s. It is also important to remember the profound impact on the mothers themselves, who too often have been treated as if they are to blame for the problems their children face and who then face years of guilt. That is a really shameful aspect of all this.

I have some case studies. Becky Parish, a mother from my own county, Norfolk, says:

“Logan is 7 and was born with a 7 mm unilateral cleft lip and palate, which the geneticist confirmed was due to Fetal Valproate Syndrome...He also has grommets and struggled with glue ear and bronchitis as a baby”. He has needed “constant speech therapy” and suffers ear infections.

Becky describes how Logan “has all facial features of FVS” and is short in height and low in weight for his age. He has “severe aggressive and destructive behaviours, including violence against others and self-injurious behaviours” and so it goes on. This is really significant. There is sometimes a danger when we talk in general or abstract terms, but when we hear the stories of the affected families, we realise just how awful it is.

Becky says “social”—social services—“blamed me for it”. Her assertion is that in her case social services thought that the problems related to a detachment disorder, with the implication being that the mother was in some way to blame. She says:

“Social blamed me for it and so did the school—and now I feel more guilt due to it being FVS. Because no matter how much someone says I didn’t know and it wasn’t my fault, the guilt never goes away. And sadly it never will.”

That is really shocking.

Becky decided not to continue with valproate when she became pregnant with her youngest child, who is now five. She says that it was not a difficult decision, because in her view her child’s health was “far more important” than her own seizures, but that must have been a terribly difficult judgment for her to make. Nevertheless, she stopped straight away and was not put on any alternative treatment, despite conflicting messages from health professionals. Her specialist nurse told her that—wait for it—she was being selfish, and made her upset at her 12-week scan. However, her neurologist said that coming off the drug was the best thing she ever did. So she got two completely conflicting messages.

Carolyn Allen in Southampton talks about how her son requires support for a number of the effects of the condition, including deafness in his left ear, noise sensitivity, and speech and language delay. She says:

“He has been referred to portage, speech therapy, occupational therapy, ophthalmic, hearing clinic, physiotherapy, community paediatricians and has already had one operation to release his tongue tie.”

Just imagine the massive impact of this condition on that family.

Paula Hartshorn, a mother from Leeds, says:

“The powers-that-be need to think about the devastating impact this has on families, and how these families have to just cope and instantly know how to deal with all these complex medical issues. We have been left to give up on our jobs, careers, social interactions, and everything that goes with a well-rounded life. There are no breaks for us.”

The stories are heartbreaking.

Kazzy Southam from Blackpool tells a story of not finding out about the condition until her daughter was nearly 20. Her voyage of discovery began when she met Janet and Emma in 2014. This was after her daughter had been diagnosed with learning disabilities, dyspraxia, and social anxiety disorder. She had to fight to get a geneticist to investigate and give advice. Eventually, it was confirmed that her daughter had foetal valproate syndrome. It was a shocking fight for her to get justice, and she should not have had to go through that. She says:

“To me, she is an angel and I wouldn’t change her for the world. She said to me not long ago: I wouldn’t want to be
about what steps to take. The September 2017 survey also found that 18% of women did not know of the harm—it was not that they had not received the toolkit, but that they still did not know. The system is failing those women.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I stand here as an advocate for my constituent, Ms Carol Short, who describes her son as a 26-year-old locked in a man’s body, but unable to do much more than a 10-year-old. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is shocking, with the clinical commissioning groups and all the funding that comes from the public sector, that we still cannot get this message through? Might one solution be shorter length prescriptions, to increase the likelihood that women receive more regular advice?

Norman Lamb: That suggestion is worth exploring. There certainly should be regular reviews—discussions on the woman’s intentions about childbirth, and on the appropriateness of the treatment for that woman at that place and time.

I acknowledge an important danger. If all the focus is on the risk of valproate, there is a risk that women will simply give up and take no medication during pregnancy, and that there will be a rise in unexpected deaths through epilepsy. SUDEP Action raised that really important issue. Already, every year, 1,200 people die sudden unexpected deaths in epilepsy, and of that total SUDEP Action estimates that about 42% are avoidable. We definitely do not want any increase in that number. For me, that points to the need for all women—indeed, all people—with epilepsy to have access to specialist teams, wherever in the country they live. My worry is that access is haphazard and variable.

Last Friday I met a specialist team in Norwich. It is a very good team, and they explained to me how they have managed to reduce the use of valproate by women in the childbearing years to a very small number. They say it is only a very small subset, for whom there is no alternative. Thus they can focus all their attention on those women. They said that there is considerable variability around the country—that many women do not get access to a specialist team. I would like the Minister to commit to the publication by the Government of data for every CCG showing the level of prescribing of this medication, to enable us to pinpoint where over-prescribing is taking place.

The interesting and rather concerning point is, if those specialists that I spoke to are right that only a very small subset of women of childbearing age need to take valproate, why is it that still, of the 173,787 people with epilepsy taking valproate, 17,848 are women of childbearing age? That looks like substantial over-prescribing, which is completely contrary to the current guidance. If the guidance is clear that it should not be prescribed to women of childbearing age unless there is no alternative that is safe for the individual woman, why on earth are so many women still being prescribed this medication? It is a scandal, and the Government need to get to grips with it.

We need a holistic approach, so that women have access to specialist care and so that full consideration can be given to the right arrangements to ensure that no woman is on valproate who need not be during those years of childbearing age. Then we might start to see an end to this awful continuing scandal.
Finally, I shall outline the steps that the Government and others should take. First, the toolkit must reach everyone. It must surely be mandatory, not voluntary. Given the clear evidence from the survey of the number of women who are not getting the message, we cannot rely on the current system to work, because it is not working. As the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) said, 400 affected babies have been born since it was introduced. That cannot continue; the warnings must be mandatory, along with raising awareness among GPs, pharmacists, specialists, midwives and health visitors.

Secondly, people should have an annual discussion with their GP or another health professional. The Epilepsy Society has argued that that should happen, and it is very much consistent with the valproate toolkit, which highlights the need for regular review. There should be face-to-face discussion with a health professional before the prescription is renewed.

Thirdly, all women should have access to specialist units, wherever they live. We must end this haphazard, variable position around the country, and we must address fully the concerns raised by SUDEP Action. Professor Ridsdale, a consultant who has specialised in this area of policy, says:

“A useful outcome of this exercise would be that whoever prescribes Valproate agrees to identify and provide regular advice to women and girls at risk. Better still, that policy-makers and providers start exploring how ongoing structured self-management advice might be offered to everyone with epilepsy.”

That is surely the ambition we should set.

Fourthly, we should publish the prescribing rates for valproate for every CCG. The Government say they have a commitment to openness, and this would be a good demonstration of it, because we would be able to identify where the real problems exist and where women are not getting access to good enough advice.

Fifthly, we should ensure that only those women who absolutely have to take valproate do so during their child-bearing years, in accordance with the advice, and that we end what appears to be the significant over-prescribing of this medication for such women.

Sixthly—this comes back to some of the interventions that have been made, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—there must be a financial support package. In a way, that comes down to the Government’s duty to these people. This has gone on for many decades, so my point is not directed just at this Government, but they have the responsibility here and now to do right by these people. There is an overwhelming moral case for them to do that, and it is not good enough for Ministers to say that support is available locally through local authorities or CCGs. These families have suffered an injustice, and the Government have a moral obligation to address it. If it is right for thalidomide victims, it is right for those who have lost out severely as a result of valproate. In France, a €10 million initial fund has been established, and it could be increased. The Government need to take the same step in this country.

Seventhly, there must be a statement of regret or apology for the people who have been let down by the system so very badly.

Finally, there is a case for an inquiry or a Hillsborough-style panel so that we can understand how on earth this outrageous scandal could ever have happened, how it has gone on for so many decades, letting down so many families, and what lessons can be learned to ensure that this never, ever happens again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. If colleagues could stick to around nine minutes, we will be able to get everybody in.

3.28 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for so eloquently articulating the concerns that many of us share about the taking of sodium valproate by expectant mothers.

I am speaking today because I believe there is a case for Ministers to answer on the grounds of compassion and justice as to how and why pregnant women were allowed to take sodium valproate for so many years without being better advised and informed, and without their unborn children being better protected from the risks. That is particularly the case since professionals became increasingly aware of those risks over the years—as early as 1973. As we have heard, the risks are huge. At the end of the day, the people who should have been able to weigh them up and choose whether to take valproate while pregnant were the mothers. I appreciate that in 1973 we were, as has been said by a practitioner in medicine, in a more paternalistic era, but that was not the case as the years went by, and certainly not in 2016, when the valproate toolkit—the patient guide that I have here in my hand—was published.

Mothers were not given the relevant information and, sadly, far too many still are not. It is absolutely critical that they are given it, because the toolkit is stark, stating:

“If you take valproate when you are pregnant it can harm your unborn child...Taking valproate...can cause birth defects and problems with development and learning...In women who take valproate while pregnant, around 10 babies in every 100 will have a birth defect”,

such as “spina bifida...facial and skull malformations...malformations of the limbs, heart, kidney” and other organs. It goes on to say that “about 30-40 children in every 100 may have developmental problems” such as “learning to walk and talk...lower intelligence...poor speech and language skills” and “memory problems.” It states that “it is...important that you...know about these risks”.

But for years women did not know about the risks when medical professionals did. They might not have known, and probably did not know, all those details. However, I have with me a copy of a letter from the Committee on Safety of Medicines—the precursor to the MHRA—from 1973. It refers to a number of studies and says:

“it is now clear from other studies...that the use of anticonvulsants during pregnancy...is liable to produce other abnormalities as well as hare-lip and cleft palate. The risk appears to be low and not sufficient to justify stopping the use of anticonvulsants when they are necessary for the control of epilepsy.”
There we have it—the Committee on Safety of Medicines was aware of this in 1973. The documentation relating to the licensing application in 1974, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, says that the product is licensed “for use in general, focal or other epilepsy. In women of childbearing age, it should only be used in severe cases or those resistant to other treatment”. So we now know that the dangers were being raised as long ago as 1973 and 1974.

In response to these concerns, the CSM instructed that an alert must “not go on the package inserts” so that patients would be protected from “fruitless anxiety”. Because patients did not see anything, they were denied the information and therefore the choice to abstain from this drug. Yet very much more anxiety was caused for many of them when the reality was that thousands of babies were born with life-changing disabilities and deformities that could have resulted from taking this drug during pregnancy.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady find it even more shocking that it was decided to keep this information from women in 1973-74, in the wake of the thalidomide scandal, when it should have been uppermost in people’s minds that pregnant women needed warning about the drugs they took? That should have made it more likely that women were informed about the risks.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Lady makes a very good point.

Further warnings were issued. In 2000, a patient information leaflet from the producer, Sanofi, said: “It is known that women who have epilepsy have a slightly higher risk of having a child with an abnormality than other women. Women who have to take Epilim in the first 3 months of pregnancy to control their epilepsy have about a 1-2% chance of having a baby with Spina Bifida.”

In 2005, Sanofi added: “Some babies born to mothers who took Epilim during pregnancy may develop less quickly than normal and may require additional educational support” and that some “babies born to mothers who took Epilim... during pregnancy may develop less quickly than normal or have autistic disorders.”

Warnings were emerging over the years, but nothing was done to ensure that patients were told. Why did patients have to wait almost 30 years to be warned of the risks?

Janet Williams and Emma Murphy, whom the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) mentioned and whom I have had the privilege of meeting, are tenacious and brave women who have campaigned for years for a support group for affected families. I pay tribute to them, and I want to tell the House a little bit about their family situations. Janet has two sons aged 26 and 28: Lee and Philip. Janet took Epilim, but nothing else, during both pregnancies. She told me: “I wasn’t offered anything else—and no one told me of the risks.”

Lee, at 26, has curvature of the spine, Asperger’s, learning difficulties and memory problems, and he cannot hold down a job. Philip, at 28, has even more problems. He has problems with hearing, vision, speech, language and walking, as well as floppy joints. He is still fully dependent on Janet.

Emma had her children a generation later. She has five children, aged eight to 14: Chloe, Lauren, Luke, Erin and Kian. They have all been diagnosed with a number of symptoms. All have varied problems, including autism, incontinence, deafness, cerebral palsy and curvature of the spine, and all are slow to develop. Emma took the same dose of Epilim during each pregnancy. She told me that she questioned that, but was told that it was the best drug to control her seizures and that her baby would be fine. She took no other drugs during her pregnancies. No one warned her of the risks.

The tragedy is that those two women represent more than 1,000 others in their support group, the Fetal Anti Convulsant Syndrome Association. Together, they founded the Independent Fetal Anti Convulsant Trust, a registered charity, to campaign for better awareness of the risks of taking valproate, to prevent further such difficulties occurring, and to challenge the Government. There is, as I say, a case to answer, and I do not believe that we would be here today were it not for these two women.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that women such as Janet and Emma are ideally placed to get compensation, should the Government agree to a system similar to the €10 million French compensation scheme for Depakine?

Fiona Bruce: I certainly think that has to be looked at as part of the case that Ministers have to answer.

I would like to say much more but time prohibits me. We have heard some of the terrible statistics that have already been cited about the 20,000 children who could have been affected since the risks were first known about, the 400 children who are still born each year with symptoms, the 28,000 women of childbearing age—according to ONS figures—who are still being prescribed the drug, and the 68% of women in this situation who say that they are not properly informed of the risks.

What do I ask of Ministers? I ask the Minister to agree that significantly more needs to be done urgently to raise awareness of the risks of taking sodium valproate among pregnant women and those who could become pregnant. Does he agree that although Ministers might have come to know about the risks only relatively recently, the producer Sanofi, the MHRA and its predecessor, the Committee on Safety of Medicines, knew about them and should have done more to address them? They should have published information and improved warnings years ago.

Does the Minister accept that the support needed by mothers such as Janet and Emma, who have to care for their children with foetal valproate syndrome, is major and may be lifelong, and that much more needs to be done to consider how that support can be improved and funded? Janet and Emma tell me that the current provision through local councils and health authorities is wholly insufficient and that care plans are needed for the many affected children.

Is there any reason why, as I said at the outset, Ministers cannot look at what we in this country can do to support these families now, without further delay, and certainly without awaiting the final decision of the
European Commission regarding the link between sodium valproate and birth defects? After all, we are leaving the EU. Does the Minister now have full confidence in the MHRA’s ability to effectively inform and guide healthcare professionals on the use of the prescription of sodium valproate for epilepsy, and does he think the same can be said of the MHRA’s involvement over the years? Finally, will the Minister, at an early date, meet Janet Williams and Emma Murphy, as well as a group of Members who are concerned about this issue, to respond to their concerns and to my call that our Government at the very least have a case to answer?

3.41 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It was heartbreaking and infuriating to read the news that 68% of the women who are taking valproate today were not aware of the risks. That is a failure for all of us. We debated this issue in March 2013, and we have put down early-day motions. There was a television programme, chaired by Huw Edwards, in which the victims took part. We thought we had cracked it: we thought we had advertised enough so that no one, after 2013, could be in the position of not realising the terrible risks caused by taking valproate in pregnancy.

I am not making any criticism of anyone, except the MHRA, and we must look at our relationship with the regulatory body. The former Minister, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), did all he could. He has a great and honourable record as a compassionate campaigner on many issues. It is a shock to all of us in that we did not expect there to be compensation, but it should now be coming along. It is not compensation in any serious way, but it is some admission that a terrible mistake has been made—not by the mothers, but by the system.

It is helpful to look back at what happened with thalidomide, which I remember vividly. There were 2,000 cases of birth defects in the United Kingdom; there were 20 in the United States. Why? The reason is that we went on prescribing Destobel for a year after the birth defects were suspected, because the drug company was adamant about it. It had tested the drug on animals, including pregnant animals—pregnant rabbits, even—and only when it went back to do another test of a particular strain of the drug on pregnant rabbits were the birth defects reproduced. That shows the limits of animal testing. The real difference was that the regulatory body in the United States would not accept thalidomide in that form, and its use produced a very small number of cases: 20 compared with 2,000.

We have had the effect of a drug called Vioxx for arthritis sufferers. According to the Food and Drug Administration in America, it caused 60,000 deaths; imagine it—60,000 deaths. How many bad reactions did the MHRA have in this country? About six. We would still be using it if the FDA had not discovered that death was one of the side effects of the drug, which was taken by millions.

GlaxoSmithKline in America has been fined—it is hard to believe—$3.5 billion. What was the fine for? It had suppressed the evidence of the trials it had carried out. It did not publish any of the negative results of the trials it carried out, and only the ones that were neutral or favourable. Drugs that were killing people were getting on to the market—this is a British company. What did the MHRA do in this country? Nothing! I wrote to them, saying, “For goodness’ sake, you have to act against GlaxoSmithKline.” It is no coincidence that the person who chaired the regulatory body for more than a decade was a previous employee of that company. I am not saying that in this instance the body did absolutely nothing; it did produce the tools and provided advice, but that clearly did not work—how could it have done if 68% of the women still taking the drug did not know?

This issue applies to all Governments; it has been raised many times before. What we need is a regulatory body that is not paid for or controlled by the pharmaceutical industry but is independent and controlled nationally. Some years ago in Italy, the system changed. The pharmaceutical industry still pays for running the body, but for the past 20 years each Government have said that they would not have a fully independent body because they did not want to pay for it, although it was fine if the burden was taken by the pharmaceutical industry itself.

I do not want to say that we are all against the pharmaceutical industry, which has produced miraculous results this century. Valproate is a very good drug: everyone I have spoken to who has used it says that it is very effective and that it reduces seizures, epileptic fits and the incidence of bipolar disorders. We do not want to stop its use at all and we want to appreciate its quality, but after these four years, when the evidence from parents who have suffered has been there, clearly nothing has worked. We must look to reform our regulatory system, appreciating the value of the drug but at least setting up a fund that can express the sorrow of the country and the regret that we have not sorted this matter out or given warnings to future parents. We must make sure that the reforms suggested by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk proceed as a matter of great urgency.

Dr Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): He has finished.

3.47 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us time in the main Chamber to consider this issue. I also pay tribute to campaigners who have done so much to raise it.

As one who works closely with constituents so gravely affected by the use of Primodos as a pregnancy test, I recognise the huge importance of airing such concerns on behalf of our constituents as widely as possible so that all can hear. There is so much work to do on Primodos, and I hope to bring those concerns to the Prime Minister shortly. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament and a former member of the Women and Equalities Committee, I want to take the time today to note, along with colleagues that many Backbench Business and Westminster Hall debates seem to focus on women’s health issues: Valproate, Primodos, vaginal mesh. It is great to see such an issue raised in the main Chamber.
Dr Whitford: I come back to the point I made earlier. We seem to see these themes. Rather than having multiple separate inquiries, should we consider issues such as Primodos and valproate together? Common learnings need to come out of them.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree. I hope to pull that issue together as I go on with my remarks. It is really important that we raise the case of sodium valproate, which, as we have heard, is still in use. All of these issues need to be looked at.

Common to this debate—and in all such cases, including Primodos—are the hidden, missing and lost documents, along with a delay in education and information. That was raised again today by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. I pay tribute to Sky News for its exposés on valproate and Primodos, because this really matters to the families affected.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): My hon. Friend raises a valid point about media coverage. I congratulate her on her campaign to clear up this mess.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Many of us have constituents, friends or family who are affected by epilepsy, which, in itself, is very serious, or by bipolar disorder. Appropriate use remains very important. For the vast majority of patients, treatment can be effective and useful if it is done right—if managed, if educated and if understood. The argument, therefore, should not be about ceasing use, but about telling the truth and looking at appropriate use during pregnancy. Men use the drug too, so we need to take a balanced approach and reflect all situations.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Lady is making really good points. I totally agree with her that the drug is appropriate for most people. I just want the guidance to be followed. The guidance is clear that for women of childbearing age it should not be used unless there is no alternative. We just need to stick to that guidance and make sure it is implemented everywhere.

Mims Davies: Absolutely. Speaking about this issue in this Chamber will empower our women constituents, before and during pregnancy, so they can be informed and make the right choices. That is the outcome we should all be hoping for.

Similar issues were raised yesterday during a debate in Westminster Hall on mesh implants. New mothers in particular had taken the advice they were given without hesitation. A woman’s first pregnancy can be an unsettling time with all the changes their body goes through. I would imagine that for people suffering from epilepsy or bipolar disorder that time is even more nerve wracking. It is absolutely right that we are measured when we talk about these issues.

It is important that our specialists ensure that women are given the correct and proper guidance. Patients need knowledge and they need it more than anyone. They live with the consequences if things go wrong and they will always look back on their decisions. If they have not been given the right information, how can they truly know they have made the right decision for themselves and their family? Siblings are often impacted as well.

The Government and MPs have a really important role to play in raising awareness of medical issues during pregnancy, including those concerning sodium valproate. I recognise the efforts that have been made, with labelling on packages. I am sure the Minister will agree, however, that more needs to be done. This drug, introduced in 1974, has been crucial, but support for families affected is also crucial. I welcome the fact that young people who have been affected are to be included in the new framework for health and social care for children and young people. It has been a real battle, but clinical commissioning groups and local authorities are getting to grips with it. It is really important that they receive support on a local level. I welcome the Minister’s forthcoming meeting with the all-party group, and I know that Ministers are taking this matter seriously, but I ask the Department for assurances on similar health issues affecting women, such as those relating to Primodos and mesh implants. We have moved to an incredible place on blood contamination—some of my constituents were affected by that—and constituents have written asking me to raise this issue too. We want more action, and there is a common denominator.

Teresa Pearce: Two years ago, I asked the Minister to extend the Primodos inquiry to include valproate, but my request was declined because, I was told, the two issues were very different, yet they seem to be quite similar. Does the hon. Lady think that that was a missed opportunity?

Mims Davies: As a woman in Parliament, I think that any opportunity not taken to raise women’s issues is a missed opportunity, and I know the Minister is listening intently.

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) raised a point about the seemingly cosy relationship the MHRA has with the drugs companies, when it suits it, and sometimes the laissez-faire attitude it adopts, when it suits it. It is incomprehensible that greater independence cannot be injected into this area. We need openness and reform. I would like the Minister to take a look at the position in France and consider setting aside some funding for compensation for medical accidents.

Few in the Chamber can imagine the hardship, guilt and heartbreak of the impact of taking a simple prescription drug during pregnancy and finding out later that it might have had an effect on one’s child. I am lucky to have two healthy beautiful daughters. We are all at the mercy of decisions we take during our pregnancy and the professional guidance we receive. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to raise awareness among people in this situation, but there are those not lucky enough to be sufficiently informed. This is an important debate, therefore, and I urge the Department to work with the MHRA to give patients full confidence in it on all pregnancy matters.

3.56 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am pleased that we are having this important debate, and I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing it and for setting out so clearly the issues involved.
My career before I was elected was as an NHS clinical scientist. Working in a biochemistry laboratory, I was very familiar with sodium valproate as part of the battery of anticonvulsant drugs for which we regularly tested patients to help their clinicians better monitor their treatment and ensure that their dosage was at the optimum level. Until I met Emma Murphy, however, and became aware of her campaign, I was not aware of what appeared to be a systemic failure to inform women of the potentially damaging effects of taking valproate during pregnancy.

Only after watching a television programme about foetal anticonvulsant syndrome did Emma herself become aware that her own children’s health problems were probably attributable to the anti-epileptic drugs she had taken while pregnant, which had been prescribed to her from the age of 12. Like everyone in the House, I pay tribute to Emma Murphy and Janet Williams for their great campaigning work.

The damage to the developing foetus is thought to be caused in the first trimester of pregnancy when the anti-epileptic drug crosses the placenta into the foetus, and the effects depend upon the dosage and the drug. Sodium valproate, or Epilim, is indicated in 80% of cases of foetal anticonvulsant syndrome. Experts such as Dr Peter Turnpenny, clinical geneticist at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, say that Epilim may affect about 560 babies every year. He adds:

“About 10% of foetuses exposed to sodium valproate will have a major congenital malformation such as cleft palate. 12% are likely to be diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder.”

Reports linking valproate to birth defects started to appear, most notably, in 1981, with a paper by H. Nau entitled “Valproic Acid and its Metabolites”. In 1983, the British Medical Journal published an article in which the Royal Liverpool Hospital cited two cases suggesting a link between birth defects and valproate taken during pregnancy. The American Journal of Medical Genetics cited seven cases in 1984 of children born with malformations to mothers taking valproate, and the Journal of Paediatrics cited 26 cases in 1986. The list goes on. It would appear that the evidence was steadily building up with the publication of more and more cases linking valproate to birth defects. The Committee on Safety of Medicines and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency noted those reports, and, I hope, monitored the use of valproate, particularly during pregnancy.

**Dr Whitford:** We have heard about various scandals. In the case of Vioxx, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), trials did not show a problem but real-world use did. Does the hon. Lady think that we need some kind of reform of the reporting system? There is something that we call a yellow card, and patients can now fill it in themselves, but many of them do not realise that. I feel that there is not enough “flagging up” when patients suspect that they are suffering from side-effects.

**Liz McInnes:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. She and I are well aware of the yellow card system, because we have both worked in the NHS, but how many people out there know that they can report side-effects of drugs, or even suspected side-effects? We really have a job to do in conveying that message to the general public, and we also need people to collate the information and act on it.

A definitive paper stating that there was a clear link between valproate taken during pregnancy and birth defects was published in 1995. It was entitled “Foetal Valproate Syndrome”, and was written by geneticists at St Mary’s Hospital, Manchester. It is clear that the evidence has been building up for a long time, so why does it appear that women were not warned about the potential dangers of taking the drug in pregnancy?

**Fiona Bruce:** That 1995 report concluded that the “risk” of foetal valproate syndrome when babies were exposed to valproate was “significant”.

**Liz McInnes:** That was probably the first research paper to suggest that it was not just coincidence and that there was a causal relationship, which is why it is seen as definitive.

The pharmaceutical company Sanofi, which many Members have mentioned, has stated that it has kept in line with scientific knowledge when reporting side-effects in a foetus. However, from as early as 1983 the CSM and the MHRA reported the problems caused by taking sodium valproate in pregnancy, but did not insist that Sanofi issue warnings in the form of a patient information leaflet.

Even now, to this day, epilepsy charities report that women are not aware of the potential risks when taking the drug in pregnancy. A survey has shown—I know it has already been mentioned, but it does no harm to reinforce these findings—that 18% of women taking sodium valproate were not aware of the risks during pregnancy, and 28% said that they had not been informed of any risks. That is despite the production by the MHRA of a valproate toolkit designed to help healthcare professionals to talk to women with epilepsy about the risks of taking valproate during pregnancy.

**Norman Lamb:** The hon. Lady is making an incredibly valuable contribution to the debate. Does she agree that if it is clear during a period of time that the amount of a drug that is being prescribed is significantly more than the guidance suggests is appropriate, it is not acceptable for the drug company, the regulator and the Government simply to be passive and to allow that to continue? If we knew that this drug was being over-prescribed, which appears to be the case, why on earth was action not taken?

**Liz McInnes:** That is a very good point, and if we manage to establish an inquiry, it should look into the issue of over-prescribing.

I want to mention other agencies. The European Medicines Agency has also recommended a strengthening of measures to reduce the risk of harm to babies born to mothers taking valproate. Information from the House of Commons Library outlines a situation in France, which has already been referred to, with an estimate that between 425 and 450 children were affected by birth defects attributable to valproate from 2006 to 2014. The French Parliament this year voted to set aside €10 million for claims related to valproate. The Health Minister, Marisol Touraine, described this as a “starting point” and stated that compensation would ultimately be paid by those deemed responsible.

“I regret that Sanofi didn’t seek an amicable settlement as a matter of principle. I hope Sanofi will change its position.”
Sanofi had no comment to make on the Minister’s remark. A class action has also been brought by the French association for people affected by sodium valproate against Sanofi.

In the UK, in 2004 a class action was brought by a group of families under the Consumer Protection Act 1987, which was expected to go to trial in 2011, but the litigation was discontinued prior to this after the Legal Services Commission withdrew funding. It is disappointing that this Government have said that there are no current plans to introduce a compensation fund similar to that in France, and I urge them to reconsider.

I fully support the remedial steps outlined in the motion, including the call for an inquiry, and this Government must bring forward a care plan and financial assistance for the victims of this national scandal.

4.6 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this important debate, which I hope will compel change. I also join colleagues in putting on record my thanks and admiration for the FACS Association founders, Emma Murphy and Janet Williams, who are here today. Emma and Janet are an inspirational pair who have turned their life-affecting experiences as victims of this syndrome, and their knowledge of victims of it, towards justice on the issue and the demand for better knowledge of the risks that sodium valproate poses to our unborn children.

I speak as someone who for 10 years or so took sodium valproate, not in utero, but in childhood. At seven years of age, I was rushed to hospital with meningitis. Within a few hours, I was fighting for my life and in a coma for two days before responding to a spinal tap. I was one of the fortunate ones and survived without any of the known side-effects such as deafness, blindness or amputation, which routinely follow for those suffering from meningitis. Instead, I was left with epilepsy for the six years that followed. During that time, I got pretty close to the NHS, its out-patients and out-patient wards, and its brilliant teams of nurses and doctors, who worked together to get me better. I was prescribed sodium valproate, and dutifully took Epilim for at least six years, so I stand here also to give voice to epilepsy sufferers in this country.

Let me give the House a sense of what it is like to endure a convulsion. There is a stillness at the control centre of the mind, but a violent movement of the body—an arm, the head or legs. You are aware of it but unable to prevent or stop it. I recall that it is possible to steer it, though I do not know how. I remember, as a young boy, enjoying, like most siblings, bunking down in a bedroom with a sibling and being able, on the rare occasions I had convulsions—only between 4 am and 6 am—to wake my sister, with whom I had enjoyed a sleepover in one of our bedrooms. She alerted my parents and I was observed until the convulsion stopped because there is nothing that can be done.

Epilim—sodium valproate’s commercial name—is widely thought to be the greatest contributing factor to curing me of epilepsy. But for a simple twist of fate, I might have consumed the drug at a different time. When Emma and Janet presented me with the National Archives papers of minutes from 1973 and 1974, when decisions were taken to withhold the knowledge of the risk to foetal development, I was stunned. There were notes in those minutes advising two consecutive, different Governments not to include any warning or information on the risk. It is all too familiar: another national cover-up and further scandal from those closed decades; the “we know what’s best for you” attitude taken by the few to the many, and often said by men to women; the long wait for social justice, and a burning injustice finally coming to light. There was conspiring against the women for whom the drug was prescribed.

I want to spread not fear, but knowledge of sodium valproate. I stand here as a record of its effectiveness, but I also stand up for the unborn children, the women and the expectant parents to whom the risks are not widely enough known. I welcome the news that warnings will feature on the outside of packaging and hope that our medical leaders and the Government will appreciate that issuing guidance is not the same as ensuring knowledge.

I support practical steps such as the distribution of the valproate toolkit to all clinicians, pharmacists and women for whom the drug is prescribed. The Government have a duty to respond with practical steps to address the problem. However, our fight is as much against the cover-up as it is for the clear picture we need to send to parents where mum is taking valproate.

On health, decisions should not be made for us, but taken with us: nothing about us without us; a democratic voice at the table; an informed patient choice, not deals in the dark. We have a democratic deficit in decision making on health matters and services. Sadly, on the evidence of last night, there is a democratic deficit on the part of the Government, too. They say they are a listening Government, but I think we have a Government who refuse to hear.

I urge the Government to listen, to make amends for this national scandal, to look at compensation, to address the lack of knowledge, to apologise to the women and to the children who are now men and women themselves, and to make clear our instruction that no content or information pertaining to health and medical prescriptions and the decisions for patients to make should ever be withheld again.

4.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a privilege to speak in these debates. I give special mention to the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith), whose powerful and personal summary of his life has greatly added to the debate. Everyone who heard his contribution will appreciate it and thank him for it. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) set the scene so capably, outlining the case for addressing valproate and foetal anticonvulsant syndrome. I pay tribute to him for the summary at the end of his speech, about which I will speak later, and his eight recommendations. If there are any recommendations to follow, those are they, as everyone in the House will agree. I thank all the other hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken,
because their contributions were equally as important, and I also thank those who made interventions. The House shines better whenever we discuss issues on which we can have an input both personally and on behalf of our constituents, and this is one such issue.

There is no greater gift from God than a little baby. I have two wee granddaughters, and I adore them. We maybe do not spend as much time with them and our children as we should, but we try. They are both perfect in my opinion, even if they have some tantrums. As girls, perhaps they have different tantrums to boys—I only had boys, so I do not know. We live on coffee in my office—I suspect everyone else is the same—and I have watched my parliamentary aide as she refused her normal 10 cups of coffee and drank only caffeine-free beverages for nine months during her pregnancies. Indeed, her not drinking coffee was the first indication that she was expecting again. She had had two miscarriages but now had one baby and was expecting her second, so she was going to take every step that she could to ensure that the baby was perfect. She said that the reason for not drinking caffeine was that it can make the baby’s heart beat a little fast. Mothers everywhere will do almost anything to ensure that they protect that little life when they know of its existence. Unfortunately, as this debate has clearly shown, some mothers did not know what was happening, which is why I feel strongly that more research must be done for the mothers who have long-term health problems and do not know how the medication they need may affect their children. Every Member who has spoken has made that point.

I want to throw another point into the equation. People with ulcerative colitis, Crohn’s disease and other conditions who have infusions such as infliximab have to come off them if they want to get pregnant. Some people are made aware of such things, but does everyone know that? I suspect not, but they should. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and others referred to the yellow card scheme, and people need to be made aware of when incidents happen. More needs to be done to ease families’ minds, and that is why I join colleagues today to ask for more to be done not only in the case of this epilepsy medication, but with more long-term medications in general. We must look beyond this debate and encapsulate what other people are saying.

Sodium valproate is an anti-epileptic drug that is associated with greater risks in pregnancy than other AEDs. Other valproate medicines include valproic acid and valproate semisodium. The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency reports that, although the general risk of foetal abnormality is 2% to 3%, the risk for women taking sodium valproate is around 10%. Did those women know? This debate illustrates that they did not, but they should have known. We have to address the issue now.

The birth defects can include spina bifida and limb, facial and skull malformations. The use of sodium valproate in pregnancy can also affect a child’s development. Many Members, including the hon. Member for Bury North in his powerful speech, have told us exactly what valproate does. Children have delays in learning to walk and talk. The drug can lower intelligence, and affected children have poor speech and language skills compared with children of the same age.

There have unfortunately been many scandals over the years, and my constituents made me aware of the thalidomide scandal, to which I can relate. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), like me, spoke in yesterday’s Westminster Hall debate on mesh implants: I have been contacted by many affected women, and they did not know what the risks were, either. They have lived with the repercussions for years. One Member mentioned a lady who had to go in three times in six years to have operations before she was cured.

The same is true of Primodos. A Member who is not here told me about his involvement with that issue. There many such scandals and, as other Members have said, we need to bring them all together under one headline.

I am not a doctor, and I have no medical skills, but I can read about symptoms. I have no medical training, but it appears that the risks are significant enough that people should be fully informed of them before they are prescribed such medication. The massive risks in taking these drugs during pregnancy will then be embedded in their minds.

Many of us were supplied with the Epilepsy Action briefing. The statistics are hard to read, but they are very clear. I also thank the Library for the in-depth information it has provided so we can prepare for this debate. The surveys to which hon. Members have referred go back to 1995-96, when a possible problem was first mooted, but no action was taken. The Library briefing says:

“This survey has been repeated in 2017, when it was found that 18% of women taking the epilepsy medicine sodium valproate didn’t know the risks this medicine can pose during pregnancy and 28% of women said that they had not been informed of the risks of this medicine in pregnancy.”

How can it be that lessons have not been learned?

Dr Rhys Thomas, an honorary consultant in epilepsy at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle, says:

“This is a dramatic and important survey focusing on a crucial area for women with epilepsy. As a medical community, we clearly could be doing more, and should be doing more. Even if women are being told of the risks, this may be at the wrong time for them—or in the wrong way.”

Sometimes the risks are not explained in a way that people understand, which is wrong. We need to have the conversation, and it has to be repeated. People need to be aware of the risks, and I am not sure that that has happened in the way it should.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency figures suggest that up to four in 10 babies are at risk of developing disorders if valproate medicine is taken during pregnancy—that is massive. How can it be ignored? Approximately one in 10 babies is at risk of physical birth defects. Babies affected by sodium valproate can have severe problems that require lifelong care and support. Are we looking at prevention? Are we looking to the future? Are we looking at what the long-term care will be? I suspect not.

It is estimated that 20,000 babies have been affected and 400 babies a year are born to women taking sodium valproate. Epilepsy Action, the Epilepsy Society and Young Epilepsy have surveyed more than 2,000 women with epilepsy, and they found that some women are still not aware of the risks of taking epilepsy medicine in pregnancy. More than a quarter of women who have taken an epilepsy drug have not been given information. That would indicate to me that a knowledgeable medical professional should have taken the time to go through

[Jim Shannon]
the risks of being pregnant with people on the drug. After someone has become pregnant, it may well be too late, so those discussions with the GP are very important. It is not a matter of someone simply stopping a drug when their pregnancy test is positive, as that is not the safe way to do things.

In conclusion, I urge that the eight points are followed, but that we should put in place the compensation fund that everyone in this House wants to see, because that will at least help the families affected to deal with the financial positions they are in.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Cat Smith. If she could finish at half past, I would be grateful. In addition, if the wind-ups could be about nine and a half minutes long, that would allow us to bring in Norman Lamb.

4.25 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to be able to be squeezed into the end of this debate, and I shall be brief. For me, this debate started within days of being elected as an MP in 2015, when my constituent Janet Williams got in touch to ask whether she could meet me. When I was first elected, I imagined that I would meet most of my constituents back up in Lancashire, but Janet was keen to get a meeting in quickly and she chased me down to Westminster. I met her in Portcullis House, along with Emma Murphy. Both of them have been mentioned a lot in this debate, and I pay tribute to the work they do on this important issue.

When I met Janet, my jaw hit the floor, as I could not believe that in this day and age women were still being prescribed drugs that were harming their unborn babies and they were not being told about it. But it was not just that they were not being told about it; a cover-up was taking place. I find this to be a national scandal, and I do not use those words lightly. I have met Janet’s sons, Philip and Lee—they are both constituents—and for them this is a life sentence. Janet should not feel guilty for taking the drugs that her doctors told her to take during her pregnancies, but her sons will continue to need care throughout their lives; they are young men in their 20s and so that is a huge social care need.

This scandal started in the 1970s but, as I have said, it continues today, with women in this country still being prescribed sodium valproate and carbamazepine—carry some risk. We therefore have to recognise that it is not just as though the doctors prescribed the wrong drug. This condition is really hard to deal with, and we need people to have specialist input. We are really asking for something that from when girls reach puberty until they reach menopause or get into their 50s—when there is no risk of them having children—decisions are made with them by specialists.

As we have heard, there was obviously a recognition right back in the 70s that sodium valproate could bring about congenital abnormalities, but what appears to have changed is the scale. If we look back, we see that people used to discuss a 2% risk of malformation and ‘some possibility’ of developmental delay. We are now talking about 10% of children having a birth defect, which might be something like a minor cleft palate that can be dealt with, right through to spina bifida, meaning the child faces major physical disability. On a much worse scale, some 40%—almost half—of children face some form of developmental delay, which might mean an autistic spectrum disorder, learning difficulty or ADHD. That is a big change.

We heard earlier about the 1995 paper that started to bring these cases together. Before that, there were predominantly case reports—someone saying, “Oh, this is odd; I’ll write it up”—but we needed someone to bring things together. When we hear that 400 affected babies have been born in the year since the recent attempt to deal with this issue, we realise that had the yellow-card reporting system been working when we had perhaps 500, 600 or 700 cases a year, the situation would have been spotted much more quickly.

The system utterly failed to recognise a pattern and has to be reformed. If a woman gives birth to a child with a birth defect, or there is in the very early years recognition of some kind of major developmental delay, and she is on a drug, that should be reported, and I do not care what the drug is. Her GP may never have seen such a thing before and might not recognise that there could be an association, but someone sitting in the MHRA who is receiving 400 or 500 reports certainly ought to.

The obvious question is how to tackle this issue. The toolkit was put out in February 2016, because we have recently recognised the huge scale of the problem—the change is the recognition of the scale. It is therefore shocking and incredibly disappointing to hear that more than two thirds of women have not received any part of it. It is great that there is now some marking on packaging, but perhaps more of that needs to be combined, because we then do not have to depend on people remembering.
to understand that we are talking about relentlessly one would be a much more powerful way to get people bringing some of these common themes together into holding multiple inquiries, we should recognise that young adult—will actually survive facing a harsh world. and of wondering how their child—perhaps now a and of learning disabilities. W e know that a child with a miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal loss. W e talked about anguish that people face, whether it is due to early seizures in pregnancy can cause the loss of the mother and the baby. She should have emergency access to a specialist, or if it would be better to change to the options with her, such as whether it would be safe to take nothing or if it would be better to change to something else. It should be recognised that uncontrolled seizures in pregnancy can cause the loss of the mother and the baby. We must not have any kind of irresponsibility by not flagging that up.

We had a debate in this Chamber last week on baby loss. It was a very powerful cross-party debate on the anguish that people face, whether it is due to early miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal loss. We talked about that loss and bereavement, but any of us—male and female—who have had children know of the expectation and joy that comes from waiting for a child. There is still exactly that bereavement when we know that our child will face a life of physical and mental difficulties, and of learning disabilities. We know that a child with a marked learning disability has only a 7% chance of working. For the parents, there is the stress of knowing that there will come a point when they are not there, and of wondering how their child—perhaps now a young adult—will actually survive facing a harsh world.

Financial support is absolutely crucial to give families peace of mind. We need an inquiry, but rather than holding multiple inquiries, we should recognise that bringing some of these common themes together into one would be a much more powerful way to get people to understand that we are talking about relentlessly repeating patterns. Let us try to reform the things that allowed this to happen and to ensure that we support the families and the children to whom, sadly, it has happened.

4.36 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It really is an honour to be responding for the second time in this Chamber today on behalf of the Opposition.

First, I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing this very important debate. It really was much needed so that we could finally discuss in detail, and in the main Chamber, the issues around valproate and what the Government must do to address this injustice. He spoke with passion and obvious outrage on behalf of the thousands of women and children affected by this disgraceful scandal.

I, too, want to thank other hon. Members who have taken part in this debate, including the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), and my hon. Friends the Members for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) gave an extremely moving account of how the drug helped him as a young boy, making the point that, when used correctly, it can be a very good drug. We also heard contributions from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) who speaks for the Scottish National party. It has been a very good debate.

As we have heard, the issues of valproate and its effects on foetuses are not new. In fact, they span a significant number of years, going as far back as the 1970s and 1980s when the first cases of the effects of valproate were documented. Even recent scientific research has shown that valproate can have an impact on a child’s life, including a study finding that 10% of children exposed to valproate will be born with a major congenital malformation, with 29% requiring additional educational support and 6% being diagnosed with significant social communication difficulties, such as autism.

Although there has been some movement on making women aware of the risks of valproate during pregnancy through the valproate toolkit, there is still far more that should and must be done to support these women and their children who have been so seriously affected by this injustice. The scope of this issue is serious. Data from 2010 show that more than 21,500 women were prescribed valproate. Although not all those women will have become pregnant, or planned to become pregnant, 85% of patients not receiving the booklet and 90% not receiving the pharmacist’s card. It is important that the women a ware of the risks of valproate during pregnancy through the valproate toolkit, there is still far more that should and must be done to support these women and their children who have been so seriously affected by this injustice. The scope of this issue is serious. Data from 2010 show that more than 21,500 women were prescribed valproate. Although not all those women will have become pregnant, or planned to become pregnant, it is worrying that, following the toolkit’s publication, there is still not enough awareness of the risks, with 85% of patients not receiving the booklet and 90% not receiving the pharmacist’s card. It is important that the Minister looks into this matter urgently and ensures that awareness is increased to help to address the lack of knowledge. That could save so many innocent lives from being irreparably damaged.

As part of that, will the Minister be minded to agree that the NHS should make it mandatory for every clinician prescribing sodium valproate to a woman or girl of childbearing age to have a conversation with her about risks during pregnancy, upon first prescribing the drug and at least yearly, before her prescription is renewed?
Over the decades there have been countless opportunities for this drug to be investigated, especially when evidence from the 1980s grew. Yet the various regulatory bodies for medicines have failed to keep their eyes on it as an issue worthy of investigation, with only fleeting references in position papers and reports, and nothing substantial. This is why it is welcome that the European Medicines Agency, in one of its first public inquiries, on 26 September 2017 called together patients, carers, doctors, pharmacists and academics to look into the matter further. It will be interesting to see the outcomes of its investigation when it concludes.

We have a duty to set the mistakes or oversights of previous Governments right, which is why we are here today—to seek justice for the victims of sodium valproate in pregnancy and their families. The Opposition welcome calls for the Government to look into how they can compensate the families who have been so significantly affected.

It must be noted that, as others have said, the drug is an effective treatment. For many it may be the only drug that works for them. Nevertheless, there is a systematic failure to inform women of the dangers of taking valproate. If expectant mothers had had the risks laid out clearly for them, many children would not have been harmed, and I hazard a guess that we would not be debating this issue today.

For those reasons Labour promised, in our election manifesto earlier this year, that we would look into this further by holding a public inquiry if we won the general election. We now make a plea to the Government. The evidence collected by In-FACT shows that despite the Government, pharmaceutical companies and regulatory bodies knowing about the risks for 40 years, that knowledge was withheld from women, which meant they were unable to make informed decisions about their drug treatment during pregnancy. I must ask the Minister: why have we not got to the bottom of this injustice, and is it not about time that we did?

A lot of the issues that we must understand and investigate are historic, yet for some they are still very prominent in their present. Many families are living with the repercussions of not being given the relevant information.

Hon. Members may have watched “Victoria Derbyshire” in recent months, on which valproate has been discussed, including last month when Deborah Mann, who took valproate during her pregnancy, discussed how the drug had affected her daughter, Branwen. Deborah had been given a dose of valproate of 5,000 mg, five times higher than the recommended daily dose of 1,000 mg. Any dose above 1,000 mg is considered to have the largest level of risk. Branwen has had to wear splints every day since she was a little girl. She is in chronic pain every day. She has migraines and problems with her brain and eyes. At just 22, Branwen has been told that she could go blind, have a stroke or even die at any moment.

I recently met the inspirational Janet Williams and Emma Murphy, who a number of hon. Members on both sides of the House have paid tribute to. I now realise that they are in the Public Gallery. They set up In-FACT in November 2012 after two of Janet’s children and five of Emma’s children were diagnosed with foetal anticonvulsant syndrome. We heard in detail from the hon. Member for Congleton the extent of the appalling damage to Emma and Janet’s precious children, and all of it was preventable. Both Janet and Emma campaign tirelessly after being told—in the case of Emma, time after time after time—that these drugs were safe to take in pregnancy. They were told the obvious questions when the truth was already well known, and they were still told that these drugs were safe to take while they were pregnant. Can hon. Members imagine how that feels? As a mum, I would be absolutely furious—we all would. I would want answers. I would want justice, and so do Janet and Emma.

It is approximated that, since 1973, 7,000 children have been harmed by exposure to valproate. No doubt there will be many other families who have failed to conceive or who have had stillbirths or miscarriages—all because of this drug. That is why we must get answers, but it is also why we must look at what compensation we can give these families because of the failure of the NHS to protect and support them. The idea of compensation has been established by our neighbours across the channel, where the French Parliament has recognised the true scale of this injustice and established a fund worth €10 million to support the victims of valproate and their families.

Opposition Members believe that mistakes should be recognised, addressed and accordingly compensated for. We also believe that burying our heads in the sand and ignoring the demands of the victims goes against the nature of justice and righting the many wrongs of the past. These families must be supported and allowed to have a full investigation into the failures and damage they have had inflicted on them.

The Minister cannot ignore the scale of this tragedy and the numbers of people who have had their lives so adversely affected not through any fault of their own, but due to medication they were prescribed by the NHS. We are here today to ensure that the Government wake up to the enormity of this scandal and take immediate action.

More must be done to make women aware of the risks of taking valproate during pregnancy, and to ensure that the injustice that has gone on for far too long is righted, with answers found and support provided to these families, who have seen their lives turned upside down because of what can only be described as a cover-up. The Minister should and must listen to what has been said today. I hope he will assure the House that he has constructively listened and that he will start the process of righting this pernicious wrong by holding a full public inquiry and properly supporting these families. They need, want and deserve justice. They should, at long last, receive nothing less.

4.46 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this debate through the good offices of the Backbench Business Committee. He has, as he indicated, taken a particular interest in this issue since it was brought to his attention during his time as a Minister in the Department of Health, and all tribute to him for being so persistent in that endeavour.

This is a very important issue. Members on both sides of the House have come together once again—for two weeks in a row, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) pointed out—to demonstrate...
their concerns. Those are not party political; these issues affect all our constituents, irrespective of any party political alliance.

We have had some very constructive suggestions on both sides of the House, and we have heard a number of the personal cases that constituents have brought to the attention of Members, which has been very moving. Rather than rehearse them, I will just point to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who went into some detail, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said, about the particular circumstances of the two outstanding campaigners—I am pleased they are here to witness this debate—who have spoken so powerfully about the effects that valproate has had on their lives and those of their children. Like other hon. Members, I have very great sympathy for those families who have been affected by valproate use in pregnancy.

The Association of British Neurologists advises that valproate remains the most effective treatment for generalised epilepsy, and this is reflected in NICE guidelines. For some women with epilepsy, it may be the only effective treatment—the only thing that prevents a potentially life-threatening seizure. However, because of its risks, valproate should be used to treat women of child-bearing age only if other drugs are ineffective or not tolerated. This is not a clear case of use or no use, as was clearly pointed out by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, who speaks with authority on these matters.

The key challenge for clinicians is to ensure that the drug is used only by those who really need it, that they are fully informed about the risks and that their treatment is closely monitored.

Norman Lamb: Does the Minister share my aspiration that we should be aiming to ensure that every woman, wherever they live, has access to a specialist unit?

Mr Dunne: I will come on to how access—and monitoring—needs to be improved.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) acknowledged, it is vital that no woman stops taking valproate, or any other anti-epileptic, without first discussing it with their doctor and, if necessary, with the relevant specialist. The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency is currently working with European regulators, and with experts and healthcare bodies, to decide what further action should be taken. Like many anti-epileptics, valproate has always been known to carry a risk if taken during pregnancy. However, as hon. Members have pointed out, important questions have been raised, here in the Chamber and elsewhere, about the extent to which women have been informed over the decades about the risks.

At the time that valproate was first marketed in 1974 for the treatment of epilepsy, animal studies had shown that there might be a risk of birth defects. Health professionals were made aware of this and were expected to weigh the benefits against the risks. Difficult prescribing decisions had to be made. Campaigners have highlighted, as did the right hon. Member for North Norfolk in his opening remarks, the minutes of a meeting of the Committee on Safety of Medicines in 1973 where the Committee concluded that it would be best not to mention the risk of birth defects in package inserts.

As has been said today, this paternalistic attitude has no place in the NHS of today. Now, patients and doctors are expected to make decisions based on open communication on the risks and benefits of a treatment, which is underpinned by legislation. However, that was not always the case, and the views expressed by the CSM in 1973 were not unusual at that time, particularly in relation to life-saving medicines such as anti-epileptics.

I am pleased to say that medical practice has changed considerably since then. Comprehensive patient information leaflets have been a legal requirement since 1999, and warnings have been issued when new evidence on risks has become available. The MHRA issued bulletins in 1983 and 1993 to update prescribers on the risk of birth defects, and in 2003 warned about a possible risk of developmental delay in children exposed to valproate during pregnancy. Warnings were extended to include a risk of autism in 2010, and a reminder bulletin was issued in 2013. Information on the full magnitude and nature of the risks with valproate first became available in 2013, following a long term follow-up of children whose mothers had taken valproate and other anti-epileptics.

Given those concerns, the MHRA initiated and led a Europe-wide review which completed in November 2014. The review found that there was still a clinical need for valproate despite the significant risks to the child if taken in pregnancy, and that it should remain an option for women of childbearing potential only where other treatments had failed or were not tolerated. To mitigate the risks, the recommendation was that women should use effective contraception and treatment should be supervised by a specialist. In January 2015, the MHRA sent a letter to doctors and pharmacists about the strengthened restrictions. As well as updating statutory information, the MHRA has developed the valproate toolkit referred to by hon. Members.

Although I am not allowed, quite properly, to use props while I am at the Dispatch Box, I cannot resist pointing out to hon. Members that the warnings now on valproate packaging include the following very specific warning:

“Warning for women and girls: This medicine can seriously harm an unborn baby. Always use effective contraception during treatment. If you are thinking of becoming pregnant or you become pregnant, talk to your doctor straight away.”

In addition to that warning on the packaging, there are other elements in the toolkit. I will not trouble the House to read them out, but they include patient cards, information for patients, and information for prescribers and clinicians. The toolkit was distributed to doctors and pharmacists in February 2016. Messages sent through different channels then and subsequently have reinforced the recommendation of its use to support discussions with patients.

In view of the importance of the issue, in the autumn of 2015 the former Minister for Life Sciences brought together healthcare bodies to support the promotion of the toolkit and ensure that there was co-ordinated messaging to health professionals and patients. The MHRA further developed that group into a 39-strong stakeholder network of health system organisations, health professional bodies, charities and campaign groups, which include In-FACT, FACS-Aware, the Organisation for Anti-Convulsant Syndrome, Epilepsy Action, the Epilepsy Society, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society.
Our communications strategy has been informed at every step by the valproate stakeholder network, including NHS England. In response to concerns about gaps in awareness that have been identified by several Members in today's debate, in July of this year the toolkit was redistributed to GPs and specialist prescribers, and additional materials were distributed to pharmacies. More than 100,000 healthcare professionals received the toolkit this year.

What are we doing beyond that? We are tracking changes in prescribing. Data show that between 2012 and 2017, there has been a decline of approximately 26% in the number of women of childbearing age treated with valproate. The decline is sharper among 10 to 17-year-olds. Although usage is declining, there has not been the step change that we would want, and, as has been mentioned today, the results of surveys of patient awareness of the risk clearly indicate that more needs to be done.

I am aware that campaigners have called for the use of the toolkit to be made mandatory. The MHRA and NHS Improvement sent out a patient safety alert in April 2017, which directs organisations systematically to identify women and girls taking valproate and to support them to make informed choices. MHRA and NHS Improvement are monitoring the implementation of the alert and are following up directly with relevant organisations. That action has been taken consistently across the UK and through the devolved Administrations.

The MHRA is fully involved in the new Europe-wide review to look into whether further restrictions are needed. An expert working group of the Commission on Human Medicines, a committee of the MHRA, has been convened to inform the UK's position during the EU review, which is expected to conclude early in the new year. This review is also looking carefully at whether there is any evidence of adverse effects in babies whose father took valproate. I am sure the whole House was moved by the personal testimony of the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) about the consequences of childhood meningitis and his six years on valproate to control epilepsy.

I hope I have made it clear that we are taking the matter seriously. I have enormous sympathy for those families who have been affected by valproate use in pregnancy. In the short time that I have available, I want to touch on a couple of the issues raised by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. He talked about support, and we have an established system, reinforced by the Children and Families Act 2014, to establish a new framework for local authorities and CCGs to secure services for children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities.

I will not get into the question of compensation or an inquiry here. What I will say to the right hon. Gentleman is that a meeting has been arranged for the chair of the all-party group with my Lords colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Health, and the issues that the right hon. Gentleman has raised should be brought up at that meeting. I encourage other members of the all-party group to join him in that meeting at the Department.

I will look at the feasibility of extending the yellow card system, as hon. Members have described. I think it is right that we shine the spotlight of transparency to improve patient safety. No Government have done more than we have to make that happen in other areas, and the victims of valproate deserve nothing less.

4.59 pm

**Norman Lamb:** I sincerely thank all right hon. and right hon. Members for participating in today's incredibly well-informed, responsible and powerful debate. This is a fight for justice. The Minister is right that we have a meeting planned for 7 December with his colleague the noble Lord O'Shaughnessy, and I hope very much that by then, the Government will have reached a view on the case for compensation. The Government have a choice: they can either deny the unanswerable moral case for treating these people properly, or they can take the moral lead and accept that the state has a responsibility to these families. I hope very much that they do the latter.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House notes with concern that there has been a systematic failure to inform women of the dangers of taking the epilepsy drug sodium valproate during pregnancy, resulting in thousands of children being born with congenital malformations, disabilities and developmental disorders since the 1970s as a result of fetal exposure to the drug; welcomes the launch of the Valproate Toolkit by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency in February 2016 to ensure that women are informed of the potential risks of the drug, but further notes with concern a recent survey which found that 68 per cent of women have still not received these safety warnings; calls on the Government to require all clinicians prescribing sodium valproate to women and girls of childbearing age to discuss annually with the patient, the risks during pregnancy before a prescription is renewed; and further calls on the Government to bring forward proposals for a care plan and financial assistance to the victims of sodium valproate in pregnancy and their families.
Money Laundering and Tax Evasion (Azerbaijan)

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

5 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for selecting this debate, and I thank the Minister for her attendance. I also thank the people who have helped me to prepare for this debate, particularly at The Guardian, Bellingcat, Transparency International and Global Witness.

We in Britain pride ourselves on our integrity, respectability and trustworthiness. We tell ourselves that this is a country that believes in high ethical standards of behaviour in the way we conduct ourselves as individuals, run our businesses and function as professionals. We preach to developing countries about how to stamp out corruption. We sell Britain to foreign investors by telling them that they can trust us, our laws, and our corporate rules and institutions.

Yet last month yet another bundle of leaked documents from yet another brave whistleblower, this time about Azerbaijan, revealed—yet again—that our self-belief is flawed. Many of the revelations and the allegations of corruption associated with the Azerbaijani ruling elite, as well as much of the evidence of money laundering, organised crime, tax evasion and bribery, come back to and are made possible by how the UK and our overseas territories choose to operate our corporate structures. Our persistent lack of transparency and our appallingly lax regulatory framework have made us the country of choice for every kleptocrat, crook and despot in the world. We have become the safe haven for dirty money. We are allowing money laundering and tax avoidance to take place on an industrial scale.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Two years ago, the then Prime Minister declared that London was not “a place to stash dodgy cash”.

A year ago, in front of 40 Governments from around the world, the UK committed to a public register of foreign companies owning UK property to prevent those who are corrupt from being able “to move, launder and hide illicit funds through London’s property market”.

Yet we have seen zero progress on all that. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a disgrace, and that with all that has happened since, the need for a public register is stronger than ever?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I do, and I will come to that later in my speech.

Our corporate rules and our weak regulatory framework are a gift to villains. Far from being proud, we should be ashamed. Today, I want to try to convince the Minister and the Government to act urgently to destroy the opportunities we are allowing, which are exploited by criminals and make us complicit in their crimes. We can stop this, but at the moment we are choosing not to do so.

Azerbaijan is well-known as a corrupt kleptocracy. It comes 123rd out of the 176 countries assessed on Transparency International’s index of corruption. Heydar Aliyev, the father of the current President, was head of the KGB in Azerbaijan in 1967, when Azerbaijan was part of the Soviet Union, and he became a full member of the Soviet Politburo in 1982. When Russia broke up, he moved seamlessly to become Azerbaijan’s ruling President in 1993, and he cracked down viciously on all opposition voices. He passed the presidency on to his son 10 years later, and Ilham Aliyev then pushed through constitutional changes to abolish the limit on the number of times one person could stand for office and to extend each term of office to seven years.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend send a copy of her speech to all the new delegates to the Council of Europe from this place, because there are examples in the recent past of Members of this House giving tacit support to and acting as apologists for the den of thieves that is Azerbaijan?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I welcome that suggestion and will do that.

Ilham Aliyev remains President to this day, and in February this year he appointed his wife Mehriban as First Vice-President, in effect anointing her his successor. According to Human Rights Watch, the ruling elite “continues to wage a vicious crackdown on critics and dissenting voices”.

But the Azerbaijani Government do want to be respected by the international community, in part because they want to sell us their oil and gas. That is why they worked to become full members of the Council of Europe, why winning the Eurovision song contest mattered and why hosting the European games in Baku was important. The so-called Azerbaijan laundromat that we are discussing today was a scheme designed to launder money out of Azerbaijan—money used to curry influence and bribe European politicians, lobbyists and apologists, and further to line the pockets of the Aliyev family and their cronies.

The scheme was revealed by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, working internationally with newspapers, including The Guardian and Corruption Reporting Project, working internationally with newspapers, including The Guardian.

The scheme was revealed by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, working internationally with newspapers, including The Guardian.

The leaked documents covered payments over a two-year period from June 2012 until the end of 2014. The payments amounted to €2.9 billion.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend, who has shown her usual great resilience in identifying financial skulduggery whenever she can; we worked together on looking at financial chicanery as fellow members of the Public Accounts Committee. Does she agree that much more detailed research is needed on this topic so that every angle and element of this huge finagle is properly understood?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I completely agree with that important point.

Money came out of Azerbaijan—nearly half from an account held at the International Bank of Azerbaijan through a shell company linked to the Aliyev family. That bank recently filed for bankruptcy. The other main contributors were two offshore companies with direct connections to a regime insider. It is hard to believe that the money was held legitimately in Azerbaijan.

The money was transferred to a small Estonian branch of Denmark’s largest bank, which is where Britain comes in. The money went into the bank accounts in Estonia of four shell companies, all of which were...
incorporated here in the UK. Our laws that allow such companies to be established were at the heart of this nefarious scheme. Much of the money then went into shady and unregulated formation agents. They can engage in transactions while hiding the identity of the real beneficial owners of the company, yet because they have the UK stamp on them they command a respectable status. Our laws allow money to be moved around and used without any questions being asked. That is simply shameful.

The leaked data show, for instance, that Luca Volontè, an Italian politician who led the European People’s Party group in the Council of Europe, received over €2 million. We know that he was instrumental in lobbying to ensure that a report criticising Azerbaijan’s human rights record was rejected by the Council of Europe in 2013. Several months after the country achieved that veneer of respectability from the Council of Europe, the European Commission announced the construction of the controversial gas pipeline from Azerbaijan to Europe. Volontè is now facing charges of corruption and money laundering in Italy.

Eduard Lintner, a former German MP, founded the Society for the Promotion of German-Azerbaijani Relations. That organisation received £819,000 over the two years covered, and Lintner got a £61,000 cash payment two weeks after returning from observing the elections in Azerbaijan and praising them for being up to German standards. The Council of Europe said the elections marked a “step forward taken by the Republic of Azerbaijan towards free, fair and democratic elections”.

The reality was that the opposition alliance boycotted the elections, there was voter intimidation and the press was gagged. Lintner has denied any wrongdoing.

Kalin Mitrev, a Bulgarian who lives in London, received €390,000 for so-called consultancy for Azerbaijan. He now sits on the board of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development that only yesterday agreed a loan to the Azerbaijan Government for €500 million to build a gas pipeline. While he recused himself from the decision and has denied any wrongdoing, his presence as a board member having received money from Azerbaijan makes it very murky and uncomfortable. He is being investigated by the Bulgarian authorities. At the same time, his wife, Irina Bokova, is Director-General of UNESCO. She bestowed one of UNESCO’s highest honours, the Mozart medal, on Azerbaijan’s first lady, the wife of the President, for: “merits in strengthening the intercultural dialogue.”

I suppose that is an innovative way of describing the use of bribes to stifle criticism and secure international support.

Those people were paid from companies incorporated in the UK: Polux Management LP, Hilux Services LP, Metastar Invest LLP and LCM Alliance LLP. All were registered at Companies House. They are shell companies, sometimes incorporated through our tax havens overseas territories, that are deliberately used to disguise the origin of the money they receive. They are set up by shady and unregulated formation agents. They can engage in transactions while hiding the identity of the real beneficial owners of the company, yet because they have the UK stamp on them they command a respectable status. Our tax system allows money to be moved around and used without any questions being asked. That is simply shameful and it is taking place right here, right now in our country.

I am particularly concerned by the trend for unscrupulous people to use Scottish Limited Partnerships—SLPs—to launder money, and to evade and avoid tax. SLPs were invented to help agricultural tenancies in Scotland. Creating an SLP allows the partnership to hold property and enter into contracts, because it gives them a legal personality. But SLPs do not need to name any “natural person”—an actual person—as partners. They can just name companies. They have limited reporting requirements—for instance, they do not need to file accounts at Companies House unless one of the partners is a UK limited company, and while they are supposed to file returns with HMRC, they do not need to pay UK tax and they do not need to have a UK bank account. Of course, HMRC does not check whether accounts are filed.

Our laws allow a secret vehicle to be created to smuggle unexplained wealth into the system, money that is then used for a variety of illegitimate as well as legitimate purposes. SLPs have become a byword for corruption, tax evasion and organised crime. Just look at the facts. There was a 430% increase in the creation of SLPs between 2007 and 2016. In 2016 alone—in that one year—more SLPs were registered than had been registered throughout the 100 years after they were introduced. Bellingcat has looked in detail at the 5,214 SLPs registered in 2016. Ninety four per cent. were controlled by corporate partners, not individuals, and 71% of those corporate partners were based in tax havens. Seventy per cent. were registered to just 10 mailbox addresses in Scotland. They are anonymous and untraceable obscured structures linked to corrupt jurisdictions.

Dr Huq: Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that since the flourish of the anti-corruption summit—and David Cameron has completely left the crime scene—this seems to have been put in the too-difficult-to-think-about box? If the Government really want a global Britain, they should table the necessary legislation as soon as possible and not use the excuse of Brexit to kick this into the long grass.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend.

The Government recently required SLPs to file statements about the persons with significant control associated with them. Only 23% of those registered in 2016—1,176 SLPs—have done so, and of those 1,176 only 28 are British nationals. In the two SLPs associated with the Azerbaijan story, the records state that the bank accounts and the shareholders were opened by the same man, Maharram Ahmadov. He transferred more than £1.7 billion from those accounts, yet the journalists found that he was a working-class driver living in a modest house in the outskirts of Baku. The companies were registered from the British Virgin Islands.

Money laundered through these structures is being spent here in the UK. We know that £50 million was paid to individuals. For instance, the documents reveal 200 of the payments made to the UK paid for education. Queen Ethelburga’s College, a private school in York, received £89,800. A tuition college, Bellerbys College, and the International School in London also received payments.

Azerbaijan money is also being used to buy property in the UK. Anar Mammadov, the son of Azerbaijan’s Minister for Transport, was just 20 when he bought a
Money Laundering and Tax Evasion

19 OCTOBER 2017

Dame Margaret Hodge

£2.75 million mansion in The Bishops Avenue, a house new valued at £7 million. Yunis Abasov, the son of Azerbaijan’s Deputy Prime Minister, was just 21 when he bought a £1.4 million penthouse flat in the Docklands. That is now valued at £3.3 million. In 2012, on reaching the mature age of 27, he bought an even grander property in Kingston upon Thames for £5 million, and he has also been granted British citizenship.

Leyla and Arzu Ilyeva, the daughters of the President of Azerbaijan, used a British Virgin Islands company to buy UK property. Leyla owns a £17 million mansion in Hampstead Lane. The property transaction was undertaken by Child & Child solicitors. It failed to declare that the buyers were politically exposed individuals but has not faced any action, despite having flouted our laws.

In the short time available, I have outlined just a few examples to show how the UK is at the heart of international money laundering, bribery and corruption, tax avoidance and tax evasion. I have described a part of the Azerbaijan story, but the same story could be told from the Panama papers, the Falciani papers, the Moldovan bank robbery and the Russian laundromat. These stories will keep on coming as more and more whistleblowers leak other scandals. The issues will not go away.

I feel deep shame and embarrassment that we in the UK are not just complicit but central to the success of these despicable practices. We seem somehow to believe that dirty money is good for the British economy, but if homes are being bought with laundered money, it just fuels house prices and adds to our housing crisis. In accepting corrupt money, we accept the lawlessness that goes with it. Ministers must act to ensure much greater transparency and to clean up the UK’s corporate structures.

I ask the Minister to address these points. The Government promised us a register of beneficial ownership of property in the UK. We want to know who owns our houses. Consultation on this ended in May and nothing has happened. When will the Minister act to create the register? The Government have yet to commence the legislation on unexplained wealth orders. Why the delay?

The Government continue to refuse to use their powers to insist on public registers of beneficial ownership in all our overseas territories, many of them tax havens. Why not act? The Government should properly staff Companies House. At the moment, six individuals are tasked with investigating breaches of company law in a register of 3.5 million corporate structures. Such under-resourcing makes a farce of our commitment to good regulation.

The Government should properly investigate the allegations made publicly in The Guardian and by Transparency International and the others, some of which I have outlined today. If allegations have been made, they must be investigated by the relevant authorities. The Government have a duty to make sure that this happens on our behalf, but it is just not happening.

The Minister should reform our corporate structures to create a more robust and transparent system. Why not ban corporate partners from LLPs and SLPs in all but exceptional circumstances? Why not insist that corporate partners must be UK-based? Why not insist that SLPs must have a natural person? Why not require that the documents of incorporation and the “person with significant control” declarations include the address, date of birth and passport or other identity details of named individuals so that we can trace them? Why not introduce a unique identifier for directors and partners of SLPs? Why not insist that partnerships incorporated in the UK should have a bank account in the UK? Why not set proper standards for the advisers and regulators, so that we can get rid of shady formation agents and reform the anti-money laundering supervisory system to ensure high and consistent standards?

All that is possible if the will to clean up our act on corporate structures is there. At present it seems that Brexit has made us incapable of tackling any wrongdoing for fear of offending some other country in some other part of the world, but Britain will never get rich on dirty money. Allowing it to roam freely will simply infect our institutions, our people and our economy. It is plain wrong that we have allowed ourselves to become the leading facilitator of money-laundering, organised crime and tax evasion. The Government can act to stop this abuse, and they must do so.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) on securing this important debate, from which I have learnt the shocking truth about Azerbaijan, and on her forensic analysis.

The Government are committed to making the United Kingdom’s financial system a hostile environment for illicit finance. The National Crime Agency takes allegations such as those identified by the right hon. Lady seriously, and will consider carefully whether recent information would allow an investigation to proceed. The Government pursue a targeted but proportionate level of enforcement that focuses on achieving compliance from companies. We seek to counter financial crime while protecting the dynamism of the UK’s business environment.

Nick Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will, but I have very little time.

Nick Smith: Does the Minister think that she has heard enough this evening to ask the authorities to launch an investigation?

Margot James: I must confess that I am not entirely aware of what my powers are in that respect, but if I am so empowered, I will certainly do as the hon. Gentleman suggests.

We want the United Kingdom to be a trusted place in which to do business, and the best place in the world in which to set up and grow a business. The UK has high standards of business behaviour and corporate governance. The overwhelming majority of its 3.9 million companies contribute productively to the economy, abide by the law, and make a valuable contribution to society. In discussing what action to take in response to the minority who abuse the system, we must not undermine its strengths or impose more burdens on the law-abiding majority without very careful consideration.

The Government are active in taking action to tackle misuse. Since 2015, we have implemented a series of reforms to increase the transparency of UK incorporated legal persons and arrangements in order to prevent
their misuse for illicit purposes. The reforms include, but are not limited to: the introduction of the publicly accessible register of people with significant control, which the right hon. Member for Barking mentioned; the abolition of bearer shares; the introduction of unexplained wealth orders; and the introduction of the combined register of trust and company service providers supervised by professional bodies, as well as HMRC.

Dr Huq: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I have a lot amount of material to cover. I will give way a little later if I have time.

It is too early to measure the impact of many of those reforms, but we expect them to make a significant difference in helping to prevent the misuse of companies and other entities, and in assisting law enforcement agencies with their investigations when misuse does occur.

The right hon. Lady mentioned Companies House. It carries out checks on all information that is received to ensure that it is valid, complete, correctly formatted and in compliance with company law filing requirements. The obligation to ensure the information is accurate lies with the company and its directors. The validation checks serve to help companies to get things right. A company commits an offence if it fails to maintain its registers and keep them up to date.

The UK has a robust system of publicly accessible data. The Government favour an approach that encourages transparency of information, followed by the scrutiny of company information over its lifetime. I appreciate that—

Nick Smith rose—

Margot James: I will give way if I have time, although I might cover the points the hon. Gentleman wants to raise.

It might appear that the system is designed around the needs of law-abiding companies, which are the vast majority. I appreciate that it is open to abuse. Maintaining one of the most open and extensively accessed registers in the world is a powerful tool in identifying false, inaccurate or possibly fraudulent information. With many eyes viewing the data, as well as errors, omissions or worse, the information held on the register can be subject to significant policing by a variety of users.

Companies House is always looking at ways to further improve the quality of data. A significant recent development includes the introduction of the “report it now” function, which makes raising concerns easier than ever before.

If irregularities are raised, Companies House follows up with the company in question, and in most cases any inaccuracies are corrected immediately. There were over 2 billion searches of the Companies House register in 2016-17, which indicates that the data are available and under scrutiny. Companies House works closely with enforcement agencies such as the National Crime Agency in sharing data analysis to combat economic crime.

I will now talk about Scottish limited partnerships, which the right hon. Lady raised. I fully recognise her concerns. Over the past year or so, serious concerns have been raised about the use of these partnerships as vehicles for criminality. As a result, my Department launched a call for evidence earlier this year to collect information about the extent of the problem and how the limited partnership legal framework might therefore need to be strengthened. The Government have been considering this evidence and I can confirm that we are actively considering reform. We will announce our next steps shortly.

That said, it is important to mention that Scottish limited partnerships are a popular form of incorporation. I accept that their number has increased over the last few years, which gives rise to perfectly legitimate suspicions, but they are also used by many legitimate businesses across the economy, particularly in the investment and pensions sectors, fulfilling a genuine commercial need.

As the right hon. Lady mentioned in her letter to me at the end of last month, as of June this year, Scottish limited partnerships and a number of other legal entities were required to identify and disclose their “people with significant control”—beneficial owners—to Companies House. This information will form part of a central register that is publicly available, consistent with the requirements already placed on other forms of UK companies since 2016. Our objective is that the requirement will provide transparency over the ownership and control of Scottish limited partnerships.

Scottish limited partnerships are also required to submit a statement at least once a year confirming that their “people with significant control” information on the companies register is accurate. The right hon. Lady highlighted in her letter to me that many companies have yet to comply, but I can assure her that they will be chased down. As this is a relatively new requirement, the build-up of the names into the register of those who own and control SLPs is still under way. Companies House is undertaking compliance activity to ensure that Scottish limited partnerships comply with the new regulations.

In summary, I can confirm that the Government are actively considering options for the reform of these partnerships and will be setting out their approach soon.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Friday 20 October 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill

Second Reading

9.34 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I start from a simple premise. An assault on anyone is wrong, but an attack on any emergency worker—whether that is a police constable, a paramedic, an ambulance driver, an accident and emergency doctor or nurse, a fire officer, a prison officer, someone working in search and rescue, or someone working on a lifeboat—is an attack on us all. And when we are all attacked, we all stand firm together.

It is not just that many of these people show daily acts of bravery; they put their lives on the line. We know that here in Parliament, where PC Keith Palmer was murdered earlier this year. We owe him a phenomenal debt of gratitude. London knows it. A brave British Transport police officer was stabbed when he faced the London Bridge attackers with nothing but a baton earlier this year. That same day, a Met officer was also stabbed when he came to defend the public, despite being off duty. The whole country knows it, too, as we have seen horrific instances, week after week, of emergency staff who have been stabbed, strangled, bitten, repeatedly punched, kicked when down on the ground, and threatened with knives and acid. It is incomprehensible that people should attack our national heroes like this. It is amazing that those staff still go the extra mile on behalf of the British public.

It is a depressing fact that the number of assaults on emergency workers has dramatically increased in recent years. The Home Office’s own figures—these are frightening—suggest that there were 24,000 assaults on police officers in England and Wales in 2016-17. The Police Federation reckons that there is an unarmed assault on a police officer every four minutes, and that is even without including police community support officers. The Ministry of Justice says that there were 7,159 assaults on prison officers last year—up a third on the previous year.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): As my hon. Friend will know, not only have attacks on police officers risen by about 7% in the past seven years, but those attacks are on fewer police officers. We have lost 20,000 police officers, so there is now more chance of a police officer being attacked than there was seven years ago.

Chris Bryant: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why I pay enormous tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who, with the Police Federation, has led the charge on this issue and brought it to the House. I feel as if I am merely carrying the baton that she elegantly shaped.

Figures from NHS Protect are equally disturbing. There were 59,794 attacks on NHS staff in 2011-12. That is bad enough, but the figure increased to 70,555 by 2015-16. Yet the number of criminal sanctions for those assaults has actually fallen in that time, from 1,380 to 1,250. That is a lot of people who are not seeing justice.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that the cost to the NHS of these attacks is estimated to be £69 million a year?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is able to read my mind, because that was my next sentence.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the figure for assaults on NHS staff is probably much higher? I know from my experience of working in the NHS that a lot of staff did not report assaults, because they were not confident anything would be done.

Chris Bryant: That is part of the problem that we—and, for that matter, the whole criminal justice system—need to address: all too often, people simply do not feel at the end of the process that they have got justice. When people see those working alongside them not getting justice, with paltry sentences handed down, they of course decide, “I don’t want to have to go through all the grief and the hassle of pressing charges.”

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con) rose—
Chris Bryant: I give way to my right hon. Friend.

Stephen Crabb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—he is my hon. Friend too. Does he agree that there is a real sense of anger and frustration not just among police officers but among other emergency workers when they see people walking out of court with, effectively, a slap on the wrist?

Chris Bryant: If it were even a slap on the wrist, that would be nice, but sometimes the punishment is absolutely minimal. It is intrinsic to justice that it has to be seen to be done, and I will come on later to why I think my Bill will make a difference. I know there are people at the criminal Bar who—perhaps out of an excessive loyalty to other lawyers—dislike it whenever we introduce a new offence, but I hope the Bill will make a difference.

Incidentally, it is worth bearing in mind the fact that this year the Welsh ambulance service has listed 114 properties as housing potentially violent people, while another 320 were listed as potentially dangerous. That is this year; in January 2016, only 50 properties were flagged up. In other words, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of places where paramedics feel they are unable to go without police support. That is truly worrying for our society.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is important to emphasise, as the hon. Gentleman just did, that assaults on emergency workers are not solely an urban problem. Given the chronic reduction in police numbers, in particular, I hope this legislation will offer greater protection for officers in rural areas, who often respond to calls with insufficient back-up and bad communications.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I can only praise her for being here today, when she could have been at the Plaid Cymru party conference. That is a phenomenal act of dedication.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): While my hon. Friend is on the subject of Wales and the frequency of attacks, may I mention a real story that was recently relayed to me by a woman married to a police officer? She told me:

“According to my children their father is the clumsiest dad ever, as we have had to tell them he ‘fell over a bin chasing someone’, ‘he walked into a Police cupboard door’, ‘he caught himself on a police car door’. I am tired of having to tell my children how about he sustained his injuries to stop them worrying.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the reality of working life for many emergency workers?

Chris Bryant: It is the reality, but it should not be—that is the point we all want to make. Of course, this affects not only the individual concerned but other members of the family. In terms of the recruitment of police officers and emergency workers in the future, people often follow their parents into a profession, and if they feel that their parents have been badly treated, it is unlikely they will come forward for these jobs in the future.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab) rose—

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Chris Bryant: I am sticking with Wales, and then I will come to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

Albert Owen: I am grateful to my hon. Welsh Friend for allowing me to intervene. He has rightly mentioned police officers, health workers and others. In his introduction, he mentioned search and rescue and lifeboats, and I declare an interest as a vice-president of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Many of these emergency workers are actually volunteers. They show us how to respect the sea; we must now show them respect.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I have had various people email me and twitter me—or whatever the verb is. [Interjection] Tweet to me. Anyway, they asked whether lifeboat staff will be included, and, of course, they are included. For that matter, the Mines Rescue Service in my constituency is as well, because search and rescue people are absolutely vital. My hon. Friend makes the very good point that many of these people are volunteers. We could, of course, argue that most emergency workers go the extra mile, and that extra mile often means, effectively, that they are working as volunteers. That is why we should stand by them.

Tracy Brabin rose—

Chris Bryant: I have been saving up my hon. Friend.

Tracy Brabin: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He mentioned that violent crime is on the rise and that people in some properties are being flagged up as potentially violent to the police. I have been lobbied by constituents who are PCSOs and find themselves increasingly going into potentially violent situations with no handcuffs, pepper spray or any of that. Will they also be included in the Bill, so that they, too, will be protected?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend raises a good point. I am not entirely sure that they would be. If that is the case, we will make sure in Committee, when I have taken a bit more legal advice, that they are included, because it would be bizarre in the extreme if they were not. PCSOs in my constituency are an absolutely vital part of the equation of community policing, and we should afford them exactly the same protection.

I should say that I have had an awful lot of conversations with Ministers over the last few weeks about the Bill, which has been a delight, and I am not entirely convinced that we yet have the definition of an emergency worker in the Bill right, because some people who work in the NHS who should be included would not be. I have talked to Ministers, and they are absolutely clear that we will put that right in Committee, so I hope both the elements I have mentioned can be put right in Committee.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that those who look after us and keep us safe need protecting with the full force of the law, and that that is the protection his Bill will provide?

Chris Bryant: Absolutely, and the point is that it needs the full force of the law. All too often, the victims, who work in our emergency services, and who know this area of the law well, have felt that the full force of the law has not been used.
I have cited some statistics, but this is not just about statistics. Last year, Nurse Sharon Morris was attacked in a mental health unit, and it is worth saying that Unison, the trade union, has found that more than two in every five mental health workers have been attacked in the last year. The effect on Sharon’s life was profound. She said:

“I’m not the same calm but confident woman I was. Personally, I’m feeling vulnerable, and I feel I’m not much use to my family as I am on edge whenever we are around people. I have nightmares and flashbacks. The worst part is seeing my assailant’s face superimposed on my eldest son’s face—they are physically similar—and I couldn’t cope with him hugging me for many weeks. I was off sick for three months, and I’m now seeking redeployment away from patient areas; I get anxious around patients, so I’m currently just doing office work.”

In fact, since she said those words, she has moved on to another area of work. That is one of the problems: these assaults are leading to a serious problem in the recruitment and retention of staff.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I certainly hope the hon. Gentleman gets a Second Reading for his Bill, which should go through unopposed. I support the Bill, but there is so much that needs to be done on it. The example he has just given would not even be covered by it, so a lot of work needs to be done in Committee before it comes back to this Chamber.

Chris Bryant: There was a version of the Bill that did include this issue, but somehow or other, by some glitch of computers, it disappeared. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that goes back to the point I made earlier. The issue is something we want to put right in Committee, and I hope the whole House will want to rectify it.

Members should just listen to what PC Adam Heslop of the British Transport police said. He had his nose broken when he was punched in the face. He had been in many situations where he feared physical assault, but he had never actually been punched. His assailant was given a curfew and ordered to pay court costs of £85 when convicted of actual bodily harm. PC Heslop said:

“I know better than to expect justice from the courts when it comes to police assaults. I think that’s one of the reasons assaults are up.”

That is the problem: if the victims do not feel that there has been justice or that justice has been seen to be done, it seems to the whole of society that people are getting away with these things—as if there is a law of lawlessness when it comes to attacking the police.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I, too, support the Bill. Between April and September, Cheshire police recorded 277 assaults on police officers. That demonstrates vividly why the Bill is needed to strengthen the law in this area. This really is a problem locally.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. As the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said, this is not just about urban areas—it is about the whole of the country. In fact, the north-west ambulance service recently reported a 24% increase in assaults on ambulance workers in that region in the past year.
appreciated. Does my hon. Friend agree that glad though they will be to get my warm wishes on this very public stage, what they want from their legislators is an understanding in law that shows we understand what happens to them on a daily basis and will act on it?

Chris Bryant: Absolutely. It is worth saying that the reason I presented this Bill rather than any other is that I did a survey of my constituents and of the wider public, to which more than 40,000 people responded, giving them a choice of six different Bills, each of which I would have been very happy to present. Another Member is doing civil partnerships and somebody else is doing votes at 16 and so on, but this subject came top in my constituency and around the country. That means that we are also responding to the public, which is an important part of what we are sent here to do.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: What an utter delight!

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for saying that. Because we now have a two-year Session for this Parliament, private Members’ Bill Fridays have been stretched out considerably. If this Bill gets its Second Reading today, as we all hope, it could easily get through Committee in the next few weeks. There is no reason why the Government could not give it Government time on a Thursday afternoon, for instance, rather than having to wait until the end of April for its remaining stages. We could then send it off to the House of Lords and it could be on the statute book by Easter rather than having to wait the whole year.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): As a former nurse, I am really pleased to see the call for blood and saliva tests when people have been bitten or spat at, because I know how worrying it is for somebody to think that they might have HIV or hepatitis. Waiting times in A&E, plus the shortage of nurses to de-escalate situations because they are busy doing 101 other things, mean that there is nobody to deal with the rising tensions in hospital situations. That is partly why assaults are on the up. This group of people have suffered under the public sector pay cap, and at least this Bill is one way of recognising their commitment.

Chris Bryant: I agree with all the different points that my hon. Friend made in her mini-speech. Indeed, I am going to make some of them myself, particularly in relation to resourcing in mental health units. It is self-evidently more difficult to make sure that staff are secure and safe at work if they feel that they are under-staffed.

Some people will think that no action is necessary and say that a new offence will make no difference. But I believe that we cannot be bystanders. We cannot just hold emergency workers’ coats while they arenger. We cannot just issue warm words. Making something illegal will not necessarily stop it, of course, but I believe that legislation can play a role in tackling this scandal and clarifying the law, sending out as clear a message as possible that we—all of us—will not put up with this. If you attack an emergency worker you will face the consequences of your actions.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Quite a lot of this is normalised by society; there is an expectation that it is part of the job. This Bill sends a clear message that emergency services workers do not have to put up with this type of behaviour and abuse.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I agree with every word. Indeed, I am going to say it again myself later.

My Bill does three things. First, it introduces a new offence of common assault or battery against an emergency worker in the performance of their duties. As I am sure hon. Members know, there are similar offences on the statute book: common assault contrary to section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1998, and assault on a police constable, a prison officer or an immigration officer in execution of his duty under section 89(1) of the Police Act 1996, section 8 of the Prison Act 1952, and section 22 of the UK Borders Act 2007. There will be a test afterwards.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am not Welsh, but the west midlands are not too far from the Welsh border. Home Office statistics show that in the west midlands alone there were just over 1,300 assaults recorded against police officers in 2016-17. I hope that the Bill gets its Second Reading and continues. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this debate, as well as dealing with assaults on emergency workers, should, and really will, send out a strong message to other public sector workers in areas such refuse collection, who also face assault, that these attacks are absolutely not acceptable and will not be tolerated?

Chris Bryant: I would like to cut the number of assaults on anyone in society—that is the truth of the matter. The hon. Lady makes a good point about public sector workers.

Incidentally, I should make one comment before I continue. My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee) referred to HIV. It is true that people often fear HIV infection in these situations, but it is almost inconceivable that somebody would be infected with HIV by being spat at. I want to make that absolutely clear. I would be horrified if my Bill were somehow to be used to increase the stigma attached to such illnesses.

There is a problem with the existing offences. Common assault makes no distinction between a member of the public and an emergency worker, and the other offences apply only to police, prison and immigration officers, and not to all emergency workers. What is more, they are all summary offences triable only in the magistrates courts, with a maximum sentence of six months.
By contrast, the Bill’s new offence will apply to all emergency workers. It will be an “either way” offence, triable in either a magistrates court or a Crown court, with a maximum sentence of 12 months, or a fine, or both. In essence, it will double the maximum sentence available for assault or battery of an emergency worker. It will give the Crown Prosecution Service an extra string to its bow and it will match the provisions already in place in Scotland.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On that point, I am trying to understand the hon. Gentleman’s reasoning for the sentence on indictment being exactly the same as the sentence on summary. Will that be teased out in Committee? What was his thinking on that?

Chris Bryant: My original suggestion was that it should be six months on a summary offence and 12 months on an indictable offence, but the Government decided that they would prefer it to be 12 months on either. Because I am in an emollient mood, I decided to go along with the Government. That may be a question for the Government, today or in Committee. There is an argument for holding the Committee stage on the Floor of the House on one of the days that might be empty over the next few weeks, given the legislative programme.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so many times. He will be aware that the Attorney General can review unduly lenient sentencing for certain offences. I have called for that to be extended to offences against police officers, which the hon. Gentleman has referenced. Will he consider the possibility that, in Committee, the offences in the Bill could be wrapped into that extended power?

Chris Bryant: That is a good point, which had not occurred to me. The hon. Gentleman has made a good case for being on the Bill Committee, and that is up to me. The Bill Committee may be growing, however, so we may have to persuade the Government Whips; I have found that if one talks nicely to Government Whips, they are sometimes helpful. We might want to bring Committee or Report to the Floor of the House so that everyone can consider the proposals.

The second thing the Bill does is mirror, in clause 2, the provisions in part 12 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003. That Act made any offence aggravated when the fact that the offence was committed in such a way.

Clause 3 defines an emergency worker. Thanks to a glitch, I think the definition is not quite right, and we will want to improve it in Committee.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con) rose—

Chris Bryant: I thought that that might prompt the hon. Gentleman to intervene. Lo and behold, Zebédee appeared.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman thought that, but I am most grateful to him for giving way and for all the work that he has done on this incredibly important Bill. On a point of definition, we could consider in Committee the inclusion of minor injuries units as well as urgent treatment centres and emergency departments. Aside from the nature of the injuries treated at each one, the public do not see much difference between those three types of emergency unit.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I would prefer the inclusion of an additional subsection, which I think would meet his point. It would state that the Bill covered a person employed for the purpose of providing, or engaged to provide, healthcare services within the meaning of section 64 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, subsection—I cannot read the little number. I agree that it is something that we need to address.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I welcome the Bill and I will support it, given the opportunity. Does the hon. Gentleman consider that clause 3 includes jailers—people who look after defendants in court while they are waiting for trials and so on? If not, perhaps some thought should be given to that. The cells at court can be volatile places and the people who work in that environment might be at risk.

Chris Bryant: That is another matter for us to tease out, of course. Clause 3(1)(e) is clear in referring to “a person (other than a prison officer) employed or engaged to carry out functions in a custodial institution”.

I think that that would cover such people, but—

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: I have no choice.

Victoria Atkins: I jumped to clause 3(3), which defines a custodial institution, and I do not read that as including cells at court. This might be a matter for the Committee.

Chris Bryant: I feel as though we are already in Committee. The hon. Lady makes a good point. Once a barrister, always a barrister; I am not sure whether she is being paid by the word or by the intervention.

[Interruption.] Sorry; there had to be one anti-lawyer comment today.

The third thing that the Bill does is make provision for the taking of samples when an assailant has spat at an emergency worker. It makes it an offence punishable by a fine of up to £500 for an assailant unreasonably to refuse to give an intimate sample, such as a blood sample. That matters, because so many officers and emergency workers have been spat at and lived in anxiety for months about whether they had contracted a communicable disease.

I want to be very careful about how people refer to HIV in particular, but I have had one example of a police officer—I met him yesterday—who was spat at, with the saliva entering his eye and mouth. The assailant
refused to give a sample, and the police officer had a false positive test for hepatitis B, which created enormous anxiety. His wife and children had to be tested as well. I just do not think that that situation is appropriate, and I hope the Bill will help to change it.

Some have argued that the Bill is unnecessary because the sentencing guidelines already deal with the matter. In particular, they say that the guidelines on assault occasioning bodily harm—section 47 offences from the Offences Against the Person Act 1861—state that the court should consider the fact that the offence was "committed against those working in the public sector or providing a service to the public" as an aggravating factor. I believe that that is drawn far too widely in the guidelines, and I want to throw a cordon sanitaire specifically around our emergency workers.

The sentencing guidelines also make it clear, as they have to by law, that there are two categories of aggravating factor: statutory, such as previous convictions and offences committed while on bail, which have been mandated by Parliament in statute law; and a non-exhaustive list of other factors, including location, timing, an attempt to conceal evidence and 14 other factors. The point is that the fact that the assault leading to bodily harm was on an emergency worker is not a statutory aggravating factor, and my Bill would make it just such a factor.

Those who argue that that is unnecessary are arguing against the very concept of statutory aggravating factors, including hate crimes. I believe that the country now widely accepts the proposition that such factors should exist. Moreover, the victims of hate crimes say that the very fact that the court has to state that the homophobic or racial element of the offence is an aggravating factor gives them a sense that justice is being done. Part of the fury that 999 workers feel is caused by the fact that that element is never stated in open court, but now it will be.

Paragraph 4.12(c) of "The Code for Crown Prosecutors" states:

"A prosecution is also more likely if the offence has been committed against a victim who was at the time a person serving the public."

That, too, is written in the widest possible terms, and I am trying to enhance the protection specifically for emergency workers, because they put themselves in harm's way on a daily basis.

Every single one of us knows that merely introducing a new offence will not put a sudden end to such assaults, and there is much else that we need to do to protect our emergency workers. This comes to a point that was made earlier: one reason many prosecutions are not made earlier: one reason many prosecutions are not seemingly reluctant to press for a prosecution. The health worker, who wants only the best for their patient, is understandably reluctant to press for a prosecution.

A hospital might be so keen to keep out of the news that their staff in the main part of the hospital, because there is not adequate capacity in the mental health services to enable people with acute mental health problems to be directed straight to the appropriate mental health services. The hospital has to spend a lot of money to protect the other patients and the staff in the accident and emergency department because so many people are very vulnerable when people with such problems come in and pose a risk. It has had to set aside separate rooms, but even then there is not enough capacity.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about NHS resources. When I visited my accident and emergency department at West Middlesex University Hospital, I found that it is spending £2 million a year on additional mental health staff in the main part of the hospital, because there is inadequate capacity in the mental health services to enable people with acute mental health problems to be directed straight to the appropriate mental health services. The hospital has to spend a lot of money to protect the other patients and the staff in the accident and emergency department because so many people are very vulnerable.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a good point. This is a debate for another day, but my feeling is that this country wants a Swedish standard of NHS on American levels of taxation, and in the end I just do not think that works. The Unison survey I mentioned earlier said that 87% of mental health staff felt that the lack of staff was the major contributory factor in attacks, and 50% felt that over-reliance on agency staff was a problem because those staff do not know the patients well enough to ensure safety and deal with them appropriately.

If the Bill is to have the desired effect, it is self-evident that the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and prisons will need adequate resources.

I again pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax. I was more delighted by her re-election than by the fact that I was myself re-elected at the general election. She has done a wonderful job of work, and we have worked closely together on this campaign. There are others I want to thank. This is going to sound like the Oscars now, but I am not going to thank Harvey Weinstein. I want to thank the Police Federation and all the trades unions—particularly the GMB, Unite and Unison, which have worked long and hard on this—as well as the Royal College of Nursing, the British Medical Association and the National AIDS Trust, which provided some important advice at the last minute.

I do not often say something like this, but many Conservative colleagues have helped me to get as tough a Bill as possible out of the Government parliamentary counsel. In particular, I am enormously grateful to the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), whom I think of as a friend. He was quite helpful when I broke my leg playing rugby—at Twickenham, incidentally—so I have to say that. I really never thought I would say this sentence, but I would like to thank the
10.14 am

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I intend to speak briefly because I know that many other colleagues want to speak. I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me so early in the debate.

I congratulate my good friend the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). He is a friend—sometimes, a critical friend—and we have worked well together on numerous issues over the years. It has been particularly good to see the very careful way in which he has sought to garner cross-party support for the Bill. I have been impressed by how he has worked with Ministers to try to refine some of its details. I hope that the Bill will enjoy a successful Second Reading and that we can move forward and work out some of the details in Committee.

I was pleased that the hon. Gentleman asked me to be one of the sponsors of the Bill. I am of course delighted to be in the House today to stand with emergency workers from my constituency of Preseli Pembrokeshire, and from all across the UK, and join in sending what I hope will be a strong signal from the House about how we value them, the manner in which we hold them and what we intend to do to improve their working lives. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I do not know her well, but she did much of the groundwork for where we are today and a lot of the credit goes to her for the work she has previously done.

The Bill now has Government support. I know from my meetings with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service and with Justice Ministers that they genuinely desire a serious, useful and practical piece of legislation to put on the statute book to ensure better legal protections for emergency workers. I am impressed by the spirit with which they have responded to the private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda. There is widespread support right across the House for the aims of the Bill and the measures in it.

In researching the aspects of the Bill with which I am less familiar, I have tried to speak to local officers during the past few weeks. I was impressed by the response I received from officers in my constituency and right across the Dyfed-Powys police force area, as well as by representatives of the local branch of the Police Federation. This time last Friday, I was in a meeting with local members of the Police Federation and a number of police officers to talk specifically about the Bill and other matters affecting them, and I was genuinely moved by some of the experiences they shared with me.

Officers do of course train and prepare for potential attacks and assaults. In some ways, that is part of their career and they expect it to happen at some point. The Dyfed-Powys police force area has some of the lowest crime rates anywhere in the country—it is a truly wonderful place to live: we do not have high levels of crime—but what struck me when talking to these officers was the sheer frequency with which assaults occur even in such a police force area.

It is true that all the offences the officers described are already covered in legislation—under the current statute book, it is not considered okay for attacks to happen on emergency workers—but I am nevertheless totally persuaded by the case they made last week, and by the case the hon. Gentleman has made, that our framework of legislation is too weak in this respect. I therefore very much support the Bill’s aim to strengthen the legislation on assaults on emergency workers.

Such assaults often occur when an officer seeks to apprehend a suspect. In one incident in my area, when police officers sought to arrest a man wanted for questioning about a domestic assault, the man drove at them in a tractor. He went on to attack one of them with a long-handled sickle—a sword, basically. He killed the police dog that was with the officer, and the officer narrowly missed being seriously injured. No one should think for a moment that such an incident does not leave a serious and deep mark on all the officers present at the scene.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very valid point about how brutal and shocking such attacks can be. I want to draw attention to one involving staff from the South East Coast Ambulance Service. While they were on duty and trying to deal with a road traffic incident, they were charged at by a driver in a car. They were attacked before they could get out of the ambulance, and had to deal with someone who might injure them before they could deal with the incident itself. Does he agree that most of our constituents do not fully appreciate the risks our emergency workers have to take?

Stephen Crabb: I agree with my hon. Friend. The vast majority of incidents never appear in newspapers and never get talked about in the media. They are hidden and affect just the officers and their families. At a time when so much good work is going on in the field of mental health and policing, we should also recognise the physical, psychological and emotional impact that an assault can have on an officer and their family. It is all too easy to forget that emergency workers are human beings too: they are mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, friends and loved ones.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned an unfortunate skirmish in his constituency in which a police dog was attacked and killed. Does he agree that it would be pertinent for the Bill to incorporate a response to attacks on animals that work in the police force and other emergency services, so that the law could deal equally with such perpetrators?

Stephen Crabb: I understand my hon. Friend’s point, but I will resist the temptation to draw this debate into a discussion about the detail. We will have time in Committee to sort that out. Let us stick to the broad principles today.
One officer with whom I spoke told me that she had recently had her nose broken on duty and that her daughter is now afraid every time her mummy puts on her police uniform—she is afraid to see her mum go to work. The impact extends far beyond the individual officer. The psychological fallout can be exacerbated when the perpetrator is seen to walk away with what seems like a slap on the wrist. If only it were a slap on the wrist; as the hon. Member for Rhondda has said, all too often it is nothing at all.

Antoinette Sandbach: In 2015-16, there were 668 attacks on NHS staff in the Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, none of which were reported for criminal sanction.

Stephen Crabb: Those are shocking figures. There is a real sense of anger, certainly among the police officers with whom I spoke and other emergency workers, when they have suffered an attack and see those responsible walking away from court with no punishment at all. That is a factor in people deciding to quit these really important occupations in our society.

Another female officer in my police force area shared an incident with me. She was punched in the face, causing her lip to bleed. The suspect was known to be infected with hepatitis C and had a cut on their hand as well. That immediately put the officer in significant danger, as there was a possibility that her own blood could be contaminated. The officer was, of course, required to have blood tests and was prescribed antibiotics to try to prevent an infection. After two weeks’ leave, the officer returned to duty. However, she will not receive her blood test results for another eight weeks and feels that her life has in effect been put on hold. It was particularly galling for this female officer to hear that the suspect, who was convicted, received a prison sentence of only five weeks, which means that they will be out of prison weeks before the officer gets her blood test results.

The fact is that far too many of our police and emergency workers believe that their experiences of assault are not treated seriously enough by the judiciary and that laughable sentences are given to their attackers. Therefore, I welcome the tougher approach that the Bill provides.

Of course, it is not just the police who face assaults. Even more incomprehensible, in some ways, is the sheer frequency of attacks on paramedics, firefighters, nurses and prison officers—people who put their own lives and safety at risk for others—when they are trying to perform their duties.

In addition to the figures shared by the hon. Member for Rhondda, figures that I saw earlier this year indicated that attacks on firefighters had trebled across Wales. South Wales fire and rescue service reported 31 incidents between April 2016 and March 2017, up from just 12 in the previous year. It said that its crews had been subjected to verbal assault and physical abuse, including having bricks thrown at them.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for citing the figures from Wales. The Scottish fire and rescue service also collates the figures, but the House of Commons Library briefing for this debate has no national figures because they are not officially collected. Does he agree that that omission from public data should be addressed?

Stephen Crabb: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The devolved Administrations have their own systems for collecting data, but that should not be a barrier to ensuring a proper UK-wide picture of what is going on across the whole country.

If we are serious about taking a zero-tolerance approach to mindless attacks on frontline workers, let us ensure that we have a framework of law that reflects that, not only for the police but for firefighters, paramedics, nurses and prison officers. There have been calls for the scope of the Bill to be widened to include workers in other health and care settings. As I have said, that is a matter for discussion in Committee. The important priority today is to ensure that this Bill passes Second Reading with the strongest possible support from across the House.

Before I finish, I wish to address one more aspect, which is the proposed powers to take blood samples and non-intimate samples such as saliva. When I began my research, I confess that I did not appreciate the significance of this issue in the context of assaults on emergency workers. One of the officers I met last week described an assault when she went to assist a woman at a domestic incident. The woman turned aggressively on the police officer and attacked her, causing several injuries including significant bleeding when she dug her long fingernails into her hand. The attacker then shouted at the officer that she was carrying a blood disease. For the past five months, that officer has been living with stress and anxiety over what she may or may not have been infected with. No samples have been taken from the attacker to check whether or not she was lying, so the officer has faced the long process of being tested herself. She told me how she has been rid of just how much physical contact she should give her own children, for fear of passing something on. The right to take samples from suspects will rapidly accelerate the process of determining a potential contraction and will give a confident assurance to those emergency workers affected that we are here to help them through the situation.

There is plenty of detail to be worked out in the Bill, but this morning gives us the opportunity to show our strongest possible support for its Second Reading. It is a chance to signal the extent of our respect and support for our emergency workers. This is not just about signalling, however. I am sceptical of proposed legislation that is just declaratory or that contains just rhetoric; the important point about this Bill is that it is practical and useful, and its measures will make a real difference to the working lives of some of the most important people in our society.
For those who are not familiar with how the “Protect the Protectors” campaign started—which surely cannot be that many people now, given that I am genuinely losing my voice from having told the story so many times this week alone—it began last summer when I took the opportunity to join West Yorkshire police in my constituency for a Friday evening late shift, shadowing a single-crewed response officer responding to 999 calls.

It was not long into my time with PC Craig Gallant that the on-board automatic number plate recognition system flagged up that a car we had just passed should be stopped in order to speak to the driver about drug offences. When the blue lights were put on, the driver initially sped away, but after a short chase, he eventually came to a stop. PC Gallant got out of the police car to speak to the driver, asking him to get out of his vehicle, but the driver, who had passengers in his car, refused to do so. It was a warm summer’s evening in an area of Halifax where, unfortunately, deprivation has fed a variety of social challenges, and those out on the streets took an almost instant and tribal dislike to the lone officer in their community.

While PC Gallant persevered with the driver, passers-by and passing vehicles began to take an interest, and a small and increasingly agitated crowd began to gather. The situation very quickly escalated when further vehicles pulled up at speed. The occupants of those cars got out to confront the officer, while the passengers of the first vehicle sought to escape by getting into one of those that had just arrived. Now facing a hostile crowd, with those engaged in criminal activity seeking to create havoc to facilitate a getaway, and some residents, disappointingly but probably unknowingly, assisting them by joining the threatening gang that had gathered, PC Gallant locked me in the police car for my own safety and was forced to draw his baton to protect himself while instructing the crowd to move back. Locked in the police car, I was equipped with nothing more than a fluorescent observer jacket. I did not know if PC Gallant had called for back-up and I did not know how to use the car radio to make contact with the control room. I cannot stress to colleagues enough the sense of powerlessness: the fear that I might have to sit in that police car and watch him take a beating, or worse. I decided that calling 999 directly was the fastest way to make contact with the control room. I cannot convey either just how it felt, having asked for the police, to be told repeatedly by an automated message, “Please hold the line.”

What was probably only seconds felt like an eternity while I watched the scene unfold. Having finally been connected, I relayed the situation to the control room. To say I was relieved when reinforcements arrived is something of an understatement. After the passers-by from the first car had managed to escape, despite PC Gallant’s best efforts, their quick getaway and the arrival of further officers meant that the situation was defused fairly quickly. Astonishingly, no injuries were sustained on that occasion. It is fair to say that PC Gallant remained much calmer than I did throughout the ordeal, but I saw for myself just how quickly situations can become dangerous and just how vulnerable officers are when they are out on their own.

Those who attended the photo drop-in on Wednesday—I thank all those who did—will have had the opportunity to meet PC Gallant, who, after the incident, simply got on with the rest of his shift and shook it off, having not been assaulted on that occasion at least, unlike on so many others.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and it is good to see her having a glass of water. I met PC Gallant the other morning. She has given us a powerful and shocking report of the incident she witnessed. Does she agree that our constituents would be shocked to find out how many attacks take place? For instance, the Police Federation survey estimates there were nearly 21,000 attacks on police officers just in Gwent in 2015-16.

Holly Lynch: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. This is what we are seeing increasingly. It is both the frequency and the severity of these incidents. If we do not take this opportunity to act and address them, they will become more normalised and we absolutely do not want that to happen.

Having shared that experience with colleagues during an Adjournment debate last October, I then found myself inundated with what can only be described as horror stories from not only the police, but emergency service workers from all over the country who had been subjected to assaults that seem to be increasing in both frequency and severity. What thoroughly depresses 999 and NHS workers is that sentences handed down to offenders for assaulting them often fail to reflect the seriousness of the crime, or, more crucially, to serve as a deterrent. Many described feeling like they had suffered an injustice twice, first at the hands of the offender and then again in court when sentences were unduly lenient.

We make the laws in here, but we ask the police to uphold and enforce them out there. To assault an emergency service worker is to show a complete disregard for law and order, for our shared values, and for democracy itself. That must be reflected in sentencing, particularly for repeat offenders. Because of the separation between lawmakers and the Sentencing Council, we have sought to explore all the ways we could toughen legislation in the Bill to protect those on the front line.

In previous speeches I have made on this subject, I told Parliament about how, just days before my shift, PC Vicky Tompkins had responded to a call in my district. On arriving, she was head-butted by an offender, knocking her to the floor. The assault snapped one of her teeth and dislodged another, causing other fractures to her mouth and face. She had to have temporary filling work and a splint put in her mouth. There is a video of PC Tompkins recounting the incident on the Police Federation’s website, which is incredibly difficult to watch. The offender was released and went on to assault another police officer not long after.

I was proud to see PC Tompkins receive an award at the district awards in June this year, following the role she played in saving the life of a suicidal young woman who was holding on to the outside of a multi-storey car park by her fingertips. Since then, however, PC Tompkins has joined the increasing number of those who have handed in their resignation and taken the decision to leave policing. I take this opportunity to thank her for her service and to let her know that her experience has fed into this campaign, which I hope will make a significant difference in protecting those who continue to serve and those who will serve.
Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who has fought a magnificent campaign over the past 12 months. We worked together when I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Home Office. I commend her for seeing this legislation through with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). The scenes she describes are upsetting and just plain wrong. Does she agree that investing in body-worn cameras for police officers will help them to secure convictions, and, I hope, higher sentences, and perhaps save them from the arduous task of having to give evidence in court and be cross-examined to explain what happened? The videos will show what happened to them and I hope that will increase convictions in these circumstances.

Holly Lynch: I am really grateful for the hon. Lady’s intervention. I thank her for her support. We had an open dialogue when she was in her previous role, which was incredibly helpful. She is absolutely right that body-worn video has given frontline officers in particular the assurance that, should they be confronted in that way, there will be an evidence base that will help to secure prosecutions in court, which is what we all want.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): On that point, in a recent conversation with police officers in Bury St Edmunds, they said how beneficial body-worn videos are. Is there scope in the Bill for their use in other circumstances, for example for those who work in ambulances and so on who also go into very aggressive situations? They could help them, too.

Holly Lynch: Again, I am grateful for that considered and thoughtful intervention. There are lots of issues surrounding the challenge we are trying to address. Legislation and sentencing is one element, and, as legislators, that is our brief, but there are all sorts of conversations about personal protective equipment. Are our frontline emergency service workers carrying everything that would be helpful in those circumstances? The hon. Lady is right that we can look in Committee at where there is scope to incorporate that, but some of those conversations will need to happen beyond this legislative process.

The second aspect of the Bill aims to deal with the hideous act of spitting at emergency service workers. As well as being horrible, spitting blood and saliva at another human being can pose a very real risk of transmitting a range of infectious diseases, some with life-changing or even lethal consequences. At an event organised by Rob Marris, the former Member for Wolverhampton South West, I met PC Mike Bruce and PC Alan O’Shea of West Midlands police, who were also able to join us for the drop-in on Wednesday; my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda recounted one of those conversations earlier. Both officers had blood spat in their faces while trying to arrest a violent offender. They both had to undergo antiviral treatments to reduce their risk of contracting communicable diseases and they faced a six-month wait to find out whether the treatment had been successful.

During that time, PC O’Shea’s brother was undergoing treatment for cancer. Because it was deemed by professionals that the risk of passing on an infection was too high should he have contracted a disease, he was advised not to see his brother throughout that intervening period. He was also advised not to see his parents, because they were in such regular contact with his brother. PC Bruce had a false positive result for hepatitis B, and, for six months until conclusive test results came through and following further tests within his family, he was understandably reluctant to be close to his wife or children, fearing for their wellbeing. Victim impact statements provided by both officers outlining their experiences, failed to secure a custodial sentence for the prolific offender. Conversely, it only empowered him further. He left court knowing that he had a much greater impact on their lives than he had initially thought and showed absolutely no remorse. At the moment, as we have already heard, if an emergency service worker is spat at, they can take a blood sample from an individual only if that person gives their permission. Needless to say that in the case of PC O’Shea and PC Bruce, the offender was not in a helpful mood, so they were subjected to antiviral treatments and a six-month wait.

The Bill would protect not just police officers, but all blue light emergency responders, as well as healthcare professionals, those engaged in search and rescue work, and prison officers.

David Morris: I have read in the newspapers—in truth, I do not know if this is correct—that when people have an AIDS test or something similar, their insurance is reviewed. Could we put in the Bill, during the Committee stage, special provision for emergency workers so they are not penalised in this way by certain insurance companies?

Holly Lynch: That had not been brought to my attention until now, and I will certainly look into it. This too may be a conversation that we need to have outside the context of the Bill, but we will undoubtedly explore all the opportunities during its passage.

A report published in December by Yorkshire ambulance service revealed that staff faced “violence and aggression” on a weekly basis. There was a 50% increase in the number of reported incidents of verbal and physical attacks on staff, with 606 incidents reported in 2015-16. Richard Bentley, a paramedic in Leeds who was also with us on Wednesday, told the BBC that he had faced three serious assaults in five years. He had been bitten, head-butted, and threatened with a knife. Members of West Yorkshire fire and rescue service have also reported being subject to assaults. On bonfire night, the service received 1,043 calls, with crews attending 265 incidents. It was disgraceful that, faced with such pressures on the busiest night of the year, firefighters in West Yorkshire were subject to 19 attacks overnight.

The Bill would also cover assaults on prison officers. Over the past 15 years, there has been a steady but dramatic increase in the number of reported incidents of prison officers being spat at or bitten. We should bear in mind that anyone can spit. People do not need to go to the trouble of acquiring or fashioning an offensive weapon in order to inflict life-changing consequences on another person; they can simply use their own bodily fluids. Regardless of whether the spitter has a communicable disease, the inability to determine that at the time of the incident leaves emergency service workers with no choice other than to undergo antiviral treatments and face an agonising six-month wait. When I checked with the Prison Officers Association, it confirmed that a prison officer would be expected to be at work in a recent conversation with police officers in Bury St Edmunds, they said how beneficial body-worn videos are. Is there scope in the Bill for their use in other circumstances, for example for those who work in ambulances and so on who also go into very aggressive situations? They could help them, too.
during the intervening time, and—unlike those in the other services—might be asked to return to his or her duties on the same wing, to face the spitter every day of that agonising period.

When I was growing up, my mum was a nurse and my dad was a police sergeant. When she was working in A&E, someone tried to kick my mum in the stomach while she was pregnant with me. My dad received a bravery award following an incident when he came home absolutely black and blue after a violent offender had resisted arrest. I am pleased to say that he succeeded in making that arrest.

This is not a new issue, but in my time as an MP I have seen that the threats facing our emergency service workers are more prevalent than ever. If we do not take this opportunity to act, we shall be letting down some of the bravest in our society and those on whom we all rely the most. I am very pleased that the Government recognise that fact, and that we are, I understand, working together to deliver changes that would go some way towards giving our emergency service workers the protection that they need in order to do their jobs and keep our communities safe.

10.42 am

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I, too, support the Bill. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who rightly made the point that an assault on an emergency worker is not just a simple case of disrespect, but undermines the very fabric of our society. That places such assaults in a category all their own.

The hon. Gentleman also said that lawyers had a part to play, and I hope that, as a lawyer myself, I shall have some sort of contribution to make. During the 20 years or so in which I practised before coming to this place, my experience was that courts generally treated assaults on frontline and emergency workers in a context of aggravation, and that tougher sentences tended to be imposed. Notwithstanding that, it is right for us to put those protections in statute and reassure emergency workers in particular, when they go out to serve us and deal with the public, that we, as a Parliament, a country and a society, are behind them through legal means.

While, as I have said, I fully support the Bill, I hope that the hon. Member for Rhondda will forgive me if I draw the House’s attention to some of my concerns about it. I genuinely want it to complete its passage through both Houses and become law, but I do feel that it needs an awful lot of work. I have a great deal of sympathy for the hon. Gentleman, because I have presented a private Member’s Bill myself, and I know that it is almost impossible for such a Bill to reach this stage in a perfect state, so this is not a criticism. However, it is important for us to get it right now if it is to succeed.

I have to say that when I read the Bill’s long title I winced, because it referred to emergency workers acting in the execution of their duty, whereas the body of the Bill refers to “the exercise of functions”. It is unclear which of those terms will apply to any legislation. If I understand the procedure correctly, the long title cannot be altered at this stage. I hope that that does not hamstring the hon. Gentleman, and I certainly hope that the Bill will not be constrained by incidents in which workers are simply carrying out the execution of their duty. I have witnessed too many occasions on which people charged with assaulting police officers during the execution of their duty have been able to walk because of a technicality—a breach of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, for instance—which means that those officers have not, at that precise moment, been acting in the execution of their duty.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman has made a very fair point. One of the reasons for the difference between (a) and (b) is the fact that the long title was drawn up before the Bill had been written; it was agreed, effectively, on First Reading, and has now been agreed on Second Reading. During the intervening period, a great many people made representations to me about the problem of securing convictions under the tighter definition to which the hon. Gentleman refers. It is not necessary to change the long title, because it is the main body of the Bill that carries the weight.

Gareth Johnson: I certainly hope that that is the case. What is positive about this is the fact that there is a cross-party consensus, and the Government are supporting the Bill. I think that an awful lot of work needs to be done by Government lawyers, and I hope that some of the lawyers in the Ministry of Justice will work closely with the hon. Gentleman to ensure that we have a workable Bill at the end of the process.

I also think that the Bill has problems with the definition of an emergency worker. The hon. Gentleman said he accepted that it did not cover all the medical workers that he wanted it to cover. The overwhelming majority of NHS workers would not be covered as things stand. It has been mentioned that people working in minor injury units will not be covered by the Bill in its present form, and that needs to change. A receptionist working in A&E would be covered, but a nurse working on a ward in a minor or other injuries unit would not. That is an anomaly that must be ironed out, and I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has acknowledged that.

Chris Bryant: We are, in a way, having a Committee stage now. Let me explain how that issue arose. I discussed an original version of the Bill with the very lawyers at the Ministry of Justice whom the hon. Gentleman urged me to talk to. An element was taken out, because we felt that ambulance workers would not be covered, and in the process we lost other workers in the NHS. I have spoken to the Justice Secretary, and he made it clear that we would put that right in Committee.

Gareth Johnson: I am very reassured by that. It is excellent news.

It is also important, given that courts generally treat assaults on frontline workers as aggravated offences, for the Bill not to say to the courts, “This is Parliament telling you when you should and should not find an aggravated offence”. The danger is that someone who slipped out of the remit of the Bill could end up with a lesser sentence as a consequence. The courts need to understand that this legislation would be in addition to, not a replacement for, the current law. If they do not do so, people who would currently be treated harshly may not be in the future, because Parliament, by implication, has not included them in the body of the legislation.
[Gareth Johnson]

Requiring emergency workers to be actively carrying out their functions also creates some problems. For example, a paramedic who was simply standing outside a hospital and was assaulted would not be covered by the Bill. I am sure that that is not the hon. Gentleman’s intention, and what I have said is not meant in any way to be a criticism, but I want the Bill to succeed.

The hon. Gentleman has rightly tried to include people who are off duty. As we know, emergency workers, especially police officers, often step in when they are off duty because they want to help someone out in particular circumstances, and it is absolutely right for them to be covered by the Bill. My fear is that the Bill is drawn too widely, because it simply covers any action that, if done while on duty, would constitute working, so it could even cover driving down a road. However, in a road rage situation, the court must—not can, but must—treat that as an aggravating factor, so that needs to be looked at.

The Bill also covers a number of offences under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, but it does not refer to the Public Order Act 1986. The hon. Members for Halifax and for Rhondda both mentioned situations in which emergency workers were threatened with a knife. That will not be covered under the Bill, and it needs to be. It is not an assault; it is an affray and comes under the Public Order Act as threatening behaviour. Therefore, the courts would not treat it as an aggravating factor under this Bill.

I appreciate that some of these matters can be ironed out in Committee, and I reiterate that I fully support the principles behind the Bill. I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Rhondda and for Halifax and all those who have assisted with the Bill. It is vital that we get it into statute and working correctly, but it has some serious problems that they have not been addressed. I will try to rattle through some of the brief points I want to make, because I am in no way trying to cause problems for the hon. Member for Rhondda in getting the Bill through Second Reading.

I want to highlight the hon. Gentleman’s definition of “emergency worker”, which for some reason does not cover customs officers, who can often put themselves in an emergency situation where they perhaps need the protection that the legislation would give to other emergency workers.

I am pleased that the Bill covers intimate and non-intimate samples. As we know, there have been many instances of police officers and other emergency workers being assaulted and having their lives placed in limbo. I shall never forget a case at City of London magistrates court where a police officer was in tears in the witness box because he had been bitten by somebody and he had just got married but, because tests were still being carried out on him, he was unable to consummate his marriage. He was unable to live a normal family life and he was in tears as a consequence.

The House appreciates that when an assault takes place on an emergency worker, it is not just the individual emergency worker who is affected; very often it is the family members as well. That is why this legislation is vital and it is right to ensure appropriate penalties for failing to give non-intimate samples. We do not want to end up making it better for someone with an infectious disease to refuse to give a sample because they would only get fined under this Bill, whereas if they gave a sample, that would be an aggravating factor and they would go to prison. That, too, needs to be sorted out.

In conclusion, I hope the Bill gets its Second Reading and is not opposed by anybody in this House. It would be a valuable contribution to the criminal justice system. It would give reassurance to emergency workers, who deserve it. It is a Bill worthy of the valiant emergency workers we have in this country.

10.53 am

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak in this important debate. I want to place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend for choosing this as his Private Member’s Bill. I think that would have been the case in many of our communities, because most people, up and down the length and breadth of this land, are fed up with the way that people—emergency services workers, the police, A&E staff, prison officers, firefighters or whatever—are going to work, just doing their job, yet being treated with such disrespect, being assaulted and their lives being put in danger. That is not right and it should not be allowed. The Law is not in the right place at present in this country, and it is absolutely right that my hon. Friend is bringing forward this Bill. I hope it will be supported unanimously and carried through, so that, finally, our country will have better laws on this issue.

When I mentioned to my constituents that I was one of the large number of cross-party co-sponsors whom my hon. Friend had brought together to support the Bill, I asked whether the emergency workers among them had anything they wanted to contribute to this debate. Among the contributions I received was an account from a police officer of why he wants the Bill to be passed. He wrote:

“I was the first to arrive and witnessed a man (a martial arts instructor) assaulting a female and telling her that she was going to die. This man was charged with attempted murder of the female in relation to this assault so I’m sure you can imagine the gravity of the assault taking place before me. The lady was being manually choked on the floor and punched to the face in an attempt to kill her. She was struggling to breathe and could not survive much longer.

I used my limited equipment of captor spray and baton in an attempt to physically hurt the man sufficiently for him to stop trying to kill the lady as my verbal commands fell on deaf ears. Eventually he dropped her like a rag doll allowing her to run for safety.

He then turned to me, adopted a fighting stance and said these words: ‘Now you are going to die’.

The man then began to punch me to the head countless times. As I stated, this man was a martial arts instructor and he was in a rage. I defended myself and fought back as best I could until a colleague arrived and we overpowered the assailant.

The man continued to make threats, stating that he would have killed the female victim had I not arrived and killed me had my colleague not arrived at the scene.”
Whilst he was charged with attempted murder he pleaded guilty to threats to kill (in relation to me) assault upon the female and possession of an offensive weapon (in relation to a knife that he took with him to commit the assault). He received six years and four months imprisonment and nothing in relation to assaulting me.

At the time the Judge stated that the actions of my colleague and me prevented the man from killing the woman.”

This account shows what an outrageous position we currently have with the law in this country and it is high time that we changed it. I wholly support the attempt by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda to do so.

10.58 am

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I welcome this Bill and I am very happy to support the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on this cross-party issue.

The nature of crime is changing. It is becoming more violent and more aggressive. Even as we see crime numbers fall, add the threat of terrorism, coupled with the sheer number of incidents involving mental health issues, and I can understand why police officers in my constituency feel besieged. My constituency is large, at about 400 square miles. That adds challenges, not just because of the size and scale of policing in our community, but because of the sense of isolation. Thirteen officers in Essex are assaulted every week. There were 666 reported cases between April 2016 and March 2017, but the real figure is far higher, because many cases go unreported. Police officers in my constituency tell me that they are scared and do not feel that the public understand or even care. This Bill sends a message that we do.

Earlier this month, officers in Saffron Walden responded to calls of road workers being threatened with a weapon. They pursued the suspect through difficult terrain. The man, heavily under the influence of drink and drugs, was eventually stopped, only to attack officers with a hammer. Officers present sustained injuries and, if not for their training and professionalism, could have been fatally injured. I am incredibly proud of Chief Inspector Carrington’s team, who put their own wellbeing at risk to keep us all safe.

I am also pleased with the Bill’s provisions for collecting samples from those offenders who spit at our emergency service workers. Spitting is a repulsive act and, when I was a London Assembly member, I worked extensively with the Met police on addressing the issue. I heard story after story of people who were worried about their health, not knowing what would happen as they waited for scarce test results. Authorities that wish to use spit guards to protect their officers should be allowed to do so.

Emergency service workers are our first and last resort. These men and women dedicate their lives to us. They run towards danger as we run away. Police officers, in particular, are not typical employees. They accept no employment rights, which means they cannot go on strike. They have to rely on this place to ensure that they are provided with the support they deserve, which is why I support the Bill.

11.1 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): My contribution to this important debate will be brief.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), as others have, on introducing this Bill and on his work to raise awareness of it. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on her work in last year’s ten-minute rule Bill and her wider “Protect the Protectors” campaign.

We all know that our emergency service workers put themselves in harm’s way every single day. They have no idea what they will face when they turn up for work. They take whatever comes, and they deal with it professionally in the true sense of public service. Our emergency service workers work hard to keep our communities safe and to look after people when they are ill or in danger. Those hugely important tasks are the bedrock of any society, and they do it on our behalf. They therefore deserve our full support and whatever protection we can provide.

Last year I took part in the police service parliamentary scheme, which gave me a small glimpse of the commitment and dedication of police officers, and of the pressure and difficult circumstances they have to deal with on a daily basis. On the scheme I spent some time with special constables. My dad was a special constable with South Wales police when I was young. He was seriously attacked in that role, and it is important that we remember the role of special constables and remember that they are an essential part of the police family. We must also remember that, ultimately, they are volunteers.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The police service parliamentary scheme is run by Sir Neil Thorne, and I was on the pilot scheme back in 1998. There is also now a fire service parliamentary scheme. I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend would commend the schemes to all colleagues so that they can get a better understanding of how the police and fire services work. I am grateful that he has mentioned the police service parliamentary scheme, which will raise awareness of it among colleagues.

Gerald Jones: The police service, fire service and armed forces parliamentary schemes give parliamentarians a small but important glimpse of those services at the grassroots and of the daily pressures they deal with on our behalf.

Attacking a police officer is already an offence but, as things currently stand, the legislation is not effective and sentences are not fit for purpose. No specific protection exists for workers in the health service. We know from the Police Federation of England and Wales that the rate of attacks on police officers is unacceptably high—one every 15 seconds according to the latest estimates.

A third of my constituency is within the Gwent police force area, and its records show that 103 police officers have been assaulted since 2015, an average of one a week, 24 of which were assaults on detention staff in custody suites. The larger part of my constituency lies in the South Wales police area, and there, on average, nine officers are assaulted in any given week. Assaults often mean that officers are absent from their duties, which means that police resources are further depleted at a time when police numbers are significantly down owing to cuts.

The actual figures might be much higher, as there is evidence to suggest that officers report only the most serious cases, while the rest go unreported. That is replicated across our emergency services, as we have heard this morning.
We also know from figures released by South Wales Fire and Rescue Service in June that there has been a 158% increase in the number of attacks against its crews in the past 12 months. Fire crews have been subjected to verbal and physical abuse and have had objects such as bricks and fireworks thrown at them as they respond to incidents, which is clearly unacceptable. Figures released in December 2016 show that NHS staff in Wales have been physically attacked more than 18,000 times over the last five years.

The evidence is there. Society supports our emergency services and the Bill, as highlighted by the survey of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda. Parliament must act and send the strongest possible message that attacks on people working on behalf of the public will not be tolerated. One of the most effective ways to do that is to create a new aggravated offence of assaulting an emergency service worker and to make it an offence for a person who has spat at or bitten an officer not to supply an appropriate sample.

I fully support the Bill and urge others to do likewise. There seems to be a sense of unity across the House on this issue, which is entirely appropriate and very welcome.

11.6 am

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I am extremely pleased to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on introducing the Bill. His speech was very good, and it was lovely to listen to him. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on working with her colleagues over the past 12 months to highlight the issue.

It is great that a Bill has finally been introduced to address the desperate calls to deal with assaults on our emergency workers. I will cover three important points: matching the punishment to the crime; ensuring that NHS emergency workers are protected; and having the ability to take bodily samples where there is a risk of disease transmission.

First, it is high time that we started protecting our protectors and ensuring that the weight of punishment was in balance with the weight of the crime. At the moment, the penalty for assaulting a frontline worker is far too low, and the aggressor can get away with just a fine, whether it be for spitting, biting or punching a public servant. There have been many examples of such assaults resulting in victims having periods out of work, yet the perpetrators get off scot-free.

I am blessed to have some amazing police community support officers.

**Chris Bryant:** I have been to Rochester.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** The hon. Gentleman has been to my constituency many times. I am keen to see what happens to the definition of “emergency worker.”

**Jo Churchill:** When we tease out that definition in Committee, I will offer up lone workers such as general practitioners who go out on call on their own. The definition should encompass the broader point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) said, those of us who represent large rural constituencies, including the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), know that people are often going into unknown situations on their own.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I was just going on to say that in Rochester I am blessed to have some amazing PCSOs. These individuals go well above and beyond their job description in how they deal with the community. One particular officer, who is part of the community and often works on her own, was attacked this year after going to help somebody. She was supported and assisted by a member of the public who was outraged at what they were seeing. PCSOs do a massive job, so it is important that they are highlighted in the definition.

We have talked about officers having to have time off work, but we must consider the mental impact on an individual who experiences any kind of abuse and physical attack. It affects them but they never quite know how it will do so. It was sad to hear the hon. Member for Halifax mention that she has had contact with policewomen over the past 12 months who are now leaving the profession—that is devastating.

Clearly, we do not currently have the legal framework to ensure that there is proper sentencing, so I am pleased that clause 2 will introduce a new aggravating factor of a more serious degree of harm than usual. That is essential, as the aggressor is hurting not only the public sector worker—our emergency frontline worker—who he or she has abused but the entire sector. When a police officer is forced to take leave following a violent incident, that force is left short-staffed, which can have a direct impact on the entire area, particularly in rural areas, as we have heard. The same can be true in any public sector, and I find this wholly unacceptable. Why should UK taxpayers have to receive a lower quality of service purely as a direct consequence of an individual’s reckless actions against another member of our community? Put simply, we cannot allow our public services to be weakened by the callous actions of individuals who are indifferent to the negative impact their behaviour has on the rest of our community. If we ensure that the presiding judge takes the wider impact into consideration and we increase the maximum sentencing time, I am positive that offenders will be less likely to assault a frontline worker.

Secondly, it is imperative that all public sector workers on the frontline are protected. The amount of physical and verbal abuse that I have seen spewed at A&E staff and other emergency workers is disgraceful, and we need to protect them. I wish to recount one quick story. Prior to being elected, I had a serious operation and I was in an A&E unit for a number of hours waiting for a life-threatening complication to be treated. I was completely out of it because of the pain, but I recall the abuse and aggression from the individual in the next cubicle while I was suffering. It was appalling, and it is terrible that we have to have police officers standing in our A&E departments—that is an outrage in itself. It is therefore great to be having this debate, but I just wanted to mention that.

Given that Scotland modified its emergency workers legislation to include healthcare workers nine years ago, I am pleased that we are now taking steps to follow suit, which is why I support the hon. Member for Rhondda.
wholeheartedly in his Bill. Many will agree that as our emergency services are already under pressure, this withdrawal of staff from active duty and, thus, a reduction in the service, is intolerable.

My third point relates to clause 4, which introduces new provisions for taking bodily samples from those suspected of assaulting an emergency worker. It is simply wrong that an emergency worker would have to go out of his or her way to ensure that they have not been infected with a disease after being assaulted. Working on the frontline may increase the risk of the transmission of an infectious disease, so our greatest concern should be to protect those who are tirelessly protecting us. By agreeing to this clause, we can save our emergency workers from that extra hassle and the mental stress and hell of having to go for weeks not knowing what has happened, as other hon. Members have mentioned. The taking of a non-intimate sample can save the victim considerable time and stress, by providing a definite result in the first instance. I very much welcome that.

I fully support the Bill, deeming it necessary legislation, particularly at the present time. While crime rates continue to increase, serious assaults on prison staff have trebled since 2013, and last year there were 24,000 assaults on police officers in England and Wales. In the short term, that has a direct impact on the frontline staff, who already have to deal with a plethora of challenges and situations. In the long run, not having these powers is not sustainable. I agree with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service that we have to send the strong message that assaulting any kind of emergency worker will not be tolerated in any form. This Bill goes a long way towards doing that.

In closing, I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in this process, and I am extremely pleased to be here to support the hon. Member for Rhondda today.

11.16 am

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make this brief contribution and pleased to follow the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who made a positive contribution and added her own story to some of the moving and horrific stories that we have heard and which have been experienced by emergency service workers across the country.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on choosing this subject for his private Member’s Bill. He correctly and generously added his acknowledgement of the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) has done in getting the Bill to where it is today. Curiously, and ironically, one of the most significant legislative achievements of parliamentarians is to win the private Members’ ballot. Clearly, that requires consummate skill, and perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda can share how he did it with the rest of us, who have been struggling for 20 years and been unable to achieve it.

Chris Bryant: I had always wanted No. 18, as it was my number at primary school, and the first year I got that number, I won.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Well, there we are—that is the secret. I was going to poke some fun at my hon. Friend and say that his constituents must be proud of him, but of course having heard that he canvassed his constituents I am sure that they are actually very proud to see him introducing the Bill today.

I should declare that which a number of colleagues know: I was a member of London fire brigade for 23 years before being elected to this place. During my 13 years as an operational firefighter, the great anomaly was that on 364 days of the year there were always those, young and old, who wanted to come into the station to see the fire engines, but on 5 November we were not always that popular. In my day, there were many fewer organised bonfires and fireworks displays, and sometimes they needed fire attention and dousing for public protection. In the approach to fireworks season, whether Diwali, which is on now, or Guy Fawkes night, I hope we have a safe period for all celebrating. We have heard too often of fireworks being used as weapons against police, fire and ambulance workers.

I am grateful to the House of Commons Library, the Fire Brigades Union and London fire brigade for their briefings on this debate. The House of Commons Library briefing says, “Prime Minister Nick Hurd”—[Interruption.] Sorry, I meant to say Policing Minister, although some of us see the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) as a future Prime Minister—and the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) has also been mentioned as a prospective future Prime Minister. The House of Commons Library briefing cites the Policing Minister as saying that “the Government supports the spirit and principle of the Bill, but that ‘there will be detail to work through’.”

Of course that is great news for the whole House, where we have heard positive speeches from Members on both sides indicating that the Bill will pass Second Reading. The briefing goes on to list the number of assaults and attacks, saying that the Home Office estimated that there were 24,000 assaults on police officers in 2016-17 and that the latest bulletin from the Ministry of Justice on safety in prisons in England and Wales says that there were more than 7,000 assaults on prison staff.

On the subject of NHS staff, NHS Protect—which my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda mentioned as being under threat—states that, according to the figures it has collected, more than 70,000 staff were affected in 2015-16.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I was in Moorfields hospital the other day, having had an eye haemorrhage, and as I sat there during the afternoon, three instances came up on the screen of someone being assaulted in one of the cubicles. I think that numbers such as those are grossly under-reported. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend quotes from personal experience, and we have heard anecdotes in other contributions in the Chamber this morning that officers and hospital staff are reluctant to report incidents other than the most serious. Clearly, there seem to be barriers preventing all the assaults that appear to be taking place from being put on record. My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I am sure that the Minister will want to comment on it. I am also grateful to her because she gives me the opportunity to mention West Ham. Just as an aside, we need three points against Brighton this evening.
In an intervention on the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), I mentioned that there were no data on attacks against firefighters. Dr Paul Hampton from the Fire Brigades Union has written to me:

“You probably know that data on attacks on firefighters is not published by the Home Office for England (figures are published in Scotland by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.).”

The right hon. Gentleman indicated that there are figures for Wales, and other hon. Members have made that same point. Dr Hampton continues:

“So I think you can make the points about the lack of central government monitoring and under-reporting in the debate.”

That supports the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), and I would be grateful if the Minister commented in his winding-up speech on the absence of data on firefighter assaults in England.

Matt Wrack, general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, made this point:

“It is never acceptable for anyone to go to work and have to put up with verbal abuse or physical assault. Yet that is what fire crews are now facing on a daily basis in some areas of the United Kingdom.”

That was written 10 years ago, and sadly it is still true today.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the stark reality is that members of the public might think that it is par for the course that this sort of thing happens to people who do these jobs? Does he also agree that the Bill will use the full force of the law to show that we unanimously disagree that the people who protect us should have to go through that?

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, which has also been made by a number of colleagues, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda. The emergency services face enough difficulties and threats to their wellbeing because of the nature of the job they do, and they are therefore entitled to whatever additional protection we can give them. I fully agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) on that point.

I want to conclude on a more positive note by making a comment on prevention rather than on dealing with perpetrators after an assault. Ms Helen Newton from the London fire brigade has supplied me with a note about one of its successful initiatives, called LIFE:

“The Local Intervention Fire Education (LIFE) course is a week-long youth intervention programme. It is a programme targeted at young people aged 14-17 who: are at risk of or involved in anti-social behaviour, gangs or other criminal activity; have poor attendance at their educational provision or have been excluded; display challenging behaviour; or are NEET (not in education, employment or training). Starting in Tower Hamlets in 2002”—

it was actually in Shadwell, in my constituency—

"the LIFE project was an innovative approach to engaging with the local community in response to repeated call-out to an estate for youth-related deliberate fire setting and the firefighters being attacked during their response. Running the LIFE courses with firefighters and the local young people helped break down the barriers, develop a respect for the emergency services and educate them about the valuable job they do for their community. Over the course of a week, the young people work alongside the London Fire Brigade to develop skills they can transfer to improve their relationships at home and support their education and future careers. It is a disciplined programme, packed with challenging practical activities which include climbing ladders, working with the breathing apparatus, hoses and casualty rescue techniques. These are interspersed with classroom sessions which teach the young people about social responsibility by learning how their behaviours impact their community, families and themselves. Working alongside the Brigade’s firefighters, they are role modelled positive behaviours and learn to respect uniformed authority figures.

Young people on LIFE may have encountered negative experiences with authority figures such as the police and their teachers, and they view the Fire Brigade in the same light. A positive and supportive rapport is developed with each young person, who then in return develops a respect for the officer they work with and the job they do for the community. Every young person has their progress evaluated by an operational trainer, enabling them to improve their key skills and build a bond of trust. These evaluations form part of a detailed portfolio containing certificates earned through the week, demonstrating a commitment to developing skills such as punctuality, conduct, politeness and effort. The portfolio is presented at a passing-out ceremony at which candidates demonstrate the skills that they have learnt during the week. They are given an individual appraisal by their trainer, and the opportunity to speak about their experiences on the course. Referral agencies, parents and partners attend the pass-out to be presented with their AQA accreditation and portfolio of achievement.”

I have attended many of these pass-out parades. They are hugely impressive events for the trainers, the youngsters and their families, as well as those who sponsor the courses: the police, the City of London, Tower Hamlets pupil referral and others.

I naturally support the Bill, as everyone who has spoken this morning does. I welcome the Government’s support, which is absolutely key for any private Member’s Bill to get on to the statute book. I also hope that the Government will continue to resource initiatives to prevent young people in particular from attacking our emergency service workers.

Finally, I again congratulate my hon. Friends for Rhondda and for Halifax. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for choosing this subject for his Bill. Emergency workers across the country have reason to be grateful to him and his colleagues.

11.27 am

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who brings an awful lot of professional experience to the debate, given his career in the fire service. I was particularly interested to hear what he had to say. It would also be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is undoubtedly a canny parliamentarian. He has introduced his Bill with great skill. In my experience, he has always been happy-go-lucky, so I am not at all surprised that he was successful in the ballot. In bringing forward his Bill, he has made sure that he gets the maximum bang for his buck. We have to get the Bill on the statute book.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) has also contributed a lot to the debate and championed this work in the House. For her, and for me, there is a personal dimension to all this. Both my parents were police officers. My dad did 30 years’ service and my mum was a frontline officer until she had me, at which point she gave that up and went on to work on the
administrative side of the police service. I cannot imagine how I would have felt, when I was growing up, if my mum or dad had come home and told me that they had been assaulted at work. I cannot imagine the sense of anger, upset, bemusement and concern that I would have felt if we had had that discussion at the dinner table on an evening while I was growing up.

**Lyn Brown**: When I was shadow policing Minister, a police officer told me that he used to go home and talk to his children about being very clumsy, because he did not want them to know about the attacks that he had suffered at work.

**Tom Pursglove**: It is just horrendous that anybody should feel that they have to go home after work and try to cover up what has happened so that their children will not be concerned about what mummy or daddy does at work every day.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): In September 2016, an officer with Devon and Cornwall police was involved in a fracas in Cornwall while arresting two males. One of the males, who was already handcuffed, spat blood and saliva into her face. She attended hospital, where her eyes were washed and blood tests were carried out—the blood testing continued for three months. In the meantime, she was worried every time she went home and kissed her grandchildren and husband. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is completely unacceptable and that we should give all power to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) in supporting the Bill?

**Tom Pursglove**: I could not have put it better myself. We all share the sentiment of “all power to the hon. Gentleman’s elbow” in making sure we get this on the statute book.

It is through the prism of my personal perspective that I look at this issue, but I do not want to detain the House for long because we must get the Bill through Second Reading today. We all support the provisions that underpin it. I want briefly to raise one gap in the law, however, that I hope the hon. Gentleman will consider in Committee. For me, that loophole was brought to the fore in a constituency context by the appalling treatment of a well-respected and dedicated police officer in Corby by the name of Candice Liverpool.

A few years ago, Candice received a report of a domestic dispute at a local address, and she attended the incident with colleagues. The male perpetrator had not committed any criminal offences, and on the attendance of officers he calmed down and the matter was resolved. At that point, he chose to become quite obnoxious to Candice. He did not raise his voice and remained calm, but he was extremely offensive on the basis of her colour. He used extremely derogatory and offensive language and appeared to enjoy her obvious discomfort and that of her colleagues, who were powerless to do anything.

Had the individual behaved in such a manner in a public place, he could have been arrested and dealt with under offences in sections 4 and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986, but that law applies only when the activity takes place in a public place or can be seen or heard from a public place. Because the offensive behaviour took place in a dwelling and could not be seen or heard by anybody outside the property, no offence was committed. In my opinion, that is wrong. I contend that any public employee, while lawfully on any premises, including private dwellings, as a result of their public service or role, should be protected in the law from racist or sexist abuse. To my mind, verbal assault is as unacceptable as physical assault. I hope the hon. Gentleman will consider that important point in Committee. There is clearly a gap in the law that could be filled.

I would also like the issue of the two-month commencement period to be addressed in Committee. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to get through this as quickly as possible, and if time could be made available I would welcome that, but I wonder whether there is any scope to reduce that two-month commencement period so that progress can be made as quickly as possible.

**Chris Bryant**: The original version of the Bill suggested that Ministers should have to lay an order for the commencement of the Bill to happen, but I was keen that that should not be part of the Bill, and I thought that two months was pretty much the shortest period we could allow for the prosecuting authorities and others to get everything out there. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, but we would be better off speeding up the processes in Parliament than the process after.

**Tom Pursglove**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that clarification, which addresses my point. We should consider anything that can be done to speed this up.

Like colleagues across the House, I pay tribute to emergency service workers in my constituency for what they do day in, day out on behalf of our communities. I cannot fathom how anybody could think it appropriate to verbally or physically assault somebody who is doing their job and trying to help them. As Members of the House, we are incredibly privileged to be able to see the work of our emergency services at close hand. That is an opportunity that not many members of the public ever get. We get a unique bird’s eye view of what is happening in our communities.

A few months ago, I went out on a “nightsafe” operation with local police officers in Corby. It was an eye-opening experience to see at first hand what they have to put up with—the volatile situations officers can find themselves in within a split second of a call coming in, the risks they face on a daily basis in fulfilling their duties. One of the big upshots of the Bill, apart from doing the right thing, is that the debate, not just in the House but out there in the country, will ensure much greater understanding among members of the public about what is going on.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned the House of Commons Library figures, but I think they bear repeating: 24,000 assaults on police officers in 2016-17; 7,159 assaults on prison officers in 2016-17; 70,555 assaults on NHS staff in 2015-16. Those are eye-watering figures that I do not think anybody in the country would have comprehended before we started a proper debate on this issue.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the promoter of the Bill, and in pointing
out the debt we owe to our emergency services. The police officers my hon. Friend spent time with on the streets of Corby will be acutely aware, as are mine in Horsham, of the pressures on our justice system. Will he join me in welcoming the fact that the Bill allows provision for offences to be prosecuted through both the magistrates courts and the Crown courts to ensure that we get swift as well as proper justice?

**Tom Pursglove:** I absolutely share that sentiment. The Bill has done a public service in itself by bringing this concerning problem to the fore: it is a national outrage that people out there in the country should be aware of, and this debate has certainly generated that awareness, which I welcome. This issue shows the House at its best. All too often people see the House in a bickering and adversarial context that they find disconcerting, unacceptable and distasteful. Our emergency service workers are the best of British and do so much for our communities. Let us make the law the very best it can be and back them to the hilt.

11.36 am

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and to listen to his experiences as the child of two police officers. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on introducing this timely and important Bill and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on her hard work to bring it forward.

More action is necessary to protect emergency workers such as healthcare staff, police officers and firefighters from violence and aggression. They perform a vital public service, putting our safety before their own, and we must do all we can to protect them. Earlier this year, PC Jack Denton from Bedfordshire police had to have staples in his head after he was struck by a blunt object. He was called to assist armed police who had handcuffed a suspected car thief who ran a way. PC Denton chased him to a house and then felt a massive thud. Bleeding and weak, he fell to the floor. He had been hit by a candlestick most likely thrown from the top window. Fortunately, PC Denton recovered from his injuries, but instances like this are far too common.

We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to frontline public workers placed in dangerous situations on a daily basis. Jim Mallen, chairman of Bedfordshire Police Federation, told me:

“Police Officers do not go to work to be verbally or physically abused. Too many officers return to their families every day having been assaulted — not only having to deal with the physical effects but battling the often long term mental impacts.”

**Mike Hill:** I understand the issues around capacity, but does my hon. Friend agree that mental health workers, by the nature of their jobs, are often at risk of assault, that such attacks need to be recorded and dealt with properly, and that adequate support needs to be provided to workers subjected to such assaults?

**Mohammad Yasin:** I agree with my hon. Friend. It is a very important point. Mental health workers do an important job and should be protected, like many other key workers in our country.

Just yesterday, Jim Mallen wrote to six more officers who had been injured on duty. Their injuries were from being driven into, elbowed in the face, bitten and kicked. He believes that the emergency services are becoming the punch-bags of society and that the time has come to punish those who see fit to assault those on the frontline. I agree with him: it is time to protect those who daily protect us.

As MPs, we all know the dangers of violent and aggressive behaviour. I am grateful for the steps the House has taken to increase security in all our constituency offices so that all MPs and their staff can feel safe at work. We now owe it to all our frontline emergency workers to do all we can to make their workplaces as safe as possible.

11.40 am

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). I thank him for that insight into the dangers faced by so many emergency workers. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is right to say that an assault on anyone is serious, and that an attack on an emergency worker is an attack on us all. The debate has highlighted the distinct lack of deterrence in the system, especially when it comes to sentencing. It is almost as if some of the most violent in our society are treated with excessive gentleness, whether in respect of attacks on emergency workers or more broadly.

Clause 3 deals with the definition of an emergency worker. I appreciate why the hon. Member for Rhondda desires a cordon sanitaire around emergency workers, but I wish to put on record the circumstances in which social workers often work. I was contacted by a constituent of mine from Blackrod. She was assaulted several times before she retired from her job as a social worker and manager of a children’s services team. Social services staff often work alone and, although they are required to keep colleagues informed of their whereabouts for safety reasons, they often do not have the back-up of colleagues immediately on hand. Social workers deal with people with a variety of issues, including mental health, and drug and alcohol problems. In such an environment, people’s behaviour can be erratic and change rapidly.

Violence against social workers is commonly regarded as “just part of the job”, with nine out of 10 social workers suffering abuse, assaults and threats. According to Community Care, councils recorded more than 45,000 incidents against social care workers in the past three years. The Bill is a step in the right direction to protect emergency workers—to protect our protectors—and I hope it can be a step in the right direction for social services to follow in future.

11.42 am

**Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for introducing the Bill. I agree with the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) about the importance of deterrence. I am sure we all find it hard to comprehend how anyone could wish to harm the emergency workers, such as paramedics or firefighters, who have rushed to help them. It is precisely because emergency workers attend events that are outside the norm and deal with people who are particularly unlikely to be able to behave...
rationally—for reasons of pain, confusion, fear, drink, drugs or just plain anger—that they put themselves at increased risk of assault.

First responders on the streets of Ipswich have been assaulted both verbally and physically by those whom they have come to help, as well as by bystanders. In the past, firefighters in Ipswich have asked me to do what I can to raise this issue. Medical staff at Ipswich hospital have been subjected to sufficient attacks for the police to have had to open an outreach police station in the hospital to deal with the trouble. It is clear that the attacks are happening; the question is how we can stop them.

If the public perceive a strong likelihood of prosecution and a stiff penalty, potential assailants, however drunk or angry they might be, will be that much less likely to launch an attack in the first place. The experience in Scotland has shown that to be the case. The existing penalties for the assault of an emergency worker are inadequate, but more importantly, the public do not perceive that assault on an emergency worker is a crime particularly likely to be prosecuted and carry a heavy sentence.

All assaults are wrong—of course they are—but it is particularly important to ensure that our emergency services can carry out their duties without being assaulted. Emergency workers are individually far more likely to be assaulted than the rest of us. They put themselves into situations in which more assaults are likely to occur. If they are assaulted, the consequences are likely to be graver, too. We all saw the fires burning out of control during the 2011 riots in Croydon and other places, where the firefighters who had been sent to deal with those blazes were subjected to sustained attack. If we do not adequately protect our emergency workers, can it be any surprise if we find it difficult to recruit the emergency workers we need?

If we can build a clear public perception that assaulting an emergency worker—any emergency worker—is a particularly heinous crime that carries a strong likelihood of prosecution and a heavy penalty, I believe that even when people are confused, angry, drunk or under the influence of drugs, they will be that much more likely not to launch an assault in the first place.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks of building a public perception in support of emergency workers. We have heard today about emergency workers being hassled by the public. We need to build a public perception that when an emergency worker is doing his or her duty, the public equally have a duty to protect that emergency worker, not to attack them. That would be a very good thing.

Sandy Martin: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is precisely the point that I wish to convey, so I thank him for clarifying that.

However aggressive or uncontrolled someone’s behaviour might be, taboos are a powerful block on people’s actions. We need to make assaults on emergency workers a taboo in England and Wales. I believe the Bill will be an important step in making that happen.

11.47 am

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin). I entirely agree that we need to make assaults on emergency workers a taboo. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her work and to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for choosing to introduce this Bill after coming top of the private Member’s Bill ballot. This is a real example of how working together, across party lines, can make a huge difference to people’s lives.

There is no question but that an attack on an emergency worker is an atrocious crime. Two police officers from Cheshire constabulary had apprehended a suspect and were driving along the motorway at 70 mph, when that suspect attacked them inside the car. One officer was receiving treatment for injuries six months after the incident. I am glad that the individual involved in that case was sentenced to 14 years’ imprisonment, reflecting the severity of the injuries received by those Cheshire police officers. I am also glad that clause 3 would extend the statutory aggravated offence not just to police officers, but to all emergency workers. All emergency service workers engage in vital work on behalf of us all. Not only do they deserve the utmost respect, but they should be able to work without fear of attack. Legislating for tougher sentences is absolutely right and I wholeheartedly support the Bill.

As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to do what we can to protect our constituents, and a responsibility to uphold law and order. Those working in the public services relevant to this Bill selflessly work to achieve those aims and we owe enormous gratitude for their unrelenting efforts. This legislation will go some way in sending a strong message about how much we value emergency workers in our communities and it will adequately punish the perpetrators of assaults against them. To that end, I ask the hon. Member for Rhondda to consider, in Committee, extending the sentencing period for the more serious offences—which would be indictable and go to the Crown court—from 12 months to 24 months, so that there is a distinction between assaults that fall at the lower end of the scale and the more serious assaults that may inevitably end up in the Crown court.

Cheshire police headquarters are based in my constituency, and I have always prioritised working closely with the police to ensure that our streets become safer. Total recorded crime in Cheshire has been falling in recent years and Cheshire police deserve a great deal of credit for that. Any attack on a police officer is a flagrant disregard for what they do for the public. One figure that has not been falling is the number of attacks on police officers. Between April and September this year—a period of just three months—Cheshire constabulary recorded 277 assaults on constables. The headquarters of Cheshire fire and rescue service are also based in my constituency. It is through working with those on the frontline that we gain an understanding of the relentless demands of the job.

The Bill provides even greater reassurance—if it were needed—of our admiration for the work of our emergency workers, and of our continuing support and protection. While preparing for this debate, I was shocked to read the figures for East Cheshire NHS Trust, where there were 124 assaults on staff between 2015 and 2016, 44 of which required medical treatment. There were 668 attacks on staff of the Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. The most shocking thing about that statistic is that, despite staff reporting 668 assaults to
the trust, not a single person was criminally sanctioned. This information is publically available; the data are collected by the NHS and published. I urge hon. Members to look at their own NHS trusts because, as a result of my preparation for the debate, I am going to go to my local NHS trust and say, “Why are you not encouraging your staff to contact the police to ensure that action is taken against people who subject them to assaults and violence? It is not good enough.”

I am pleased that the Government are supporting this private Member’s Bill. It will not only provide greater protections for emergency workers, who give so much to society, but mean that the force of the law is greater against those jeopardising the invaluable work of our police officers, paramedics, prison officers, firefighters, nurses, doctors and other public servants. I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda for the work he has put into the Bill and I am pleased to support it. I hope that other hon. Members will check the figures for their NHS trusts. We must ensure that the protections we are trying to get into law are actually acted upon, and that the CPS and local police take action to prosecute those who assault our emergency service workers.

11.54 am

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). Let me start, as so many right hon. and hon. Members have—

[Interruption.]

I have only said three words, and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is asking me to speed up. I mean, I was just clearing my throat, and I was just about to congratulate him on bringing in the Bill—

Chris Bryant: Don’t bother.

Simon Hoare: Oh, he does not want me to. In that case, it is a great pleasure not to congratulate him on bringing in the Bill. To please him, as a fellow Welshman—that was obviously one of his key criteria for Members taking part in the debate—I will be as quick as I can.

It is important to remember, for the benefit of those the Bill seeks to protect, that there are protections in the law today. I just wanted to make sure that was on the record, because I would hate those who often work in vulnerable and dangerous circumstances to think this was the first time lawmakers had thought about this. As the hon. Gentleman said in his opening remarks, there is legislation already, but the Bill rightly seeks to identify a cohort of people whom we want to recognise for the work they do and for whom we want to provide additional protection.

In supporting the Bill, let me say that I think quite a few things will be teased out in Committee—if the hon. Gentleman is looking for recruits for the Committee, I would be very happy to serve on it. If it is not too late, we may need to think about the title of the Bill, because there are people we would want to be covered by clause 3, on the meaning of “emergency worker”, who would perhaps not be described as emergency workers.

Chris Bryant: I have inadvertently misled the House. Earlier, I suggested that I could not change the long title, but I could change it in Committee.

Incidentally, I was trying to say earlier that hon. Members do not have to keep on saying thank you to me and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch).

Holly Lynch: Steady on.

Simon Hoare: Inadvertently, the hon. Gentleman—in his usual humble, don’t look at me, I’m pretending not to be here sort of way—has drawn attention to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I know from talking to my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), when he was the Policing Minister, about the important work the hon. Lady has done on this proposal, and she deserves the thanks of the House.

It is great that the hon. Gentleman has confirmed that the long title can be changed. I just wonder whether it should refer to assaults on “public service workers”.

There are a number of categories of people I do not think anybody would seek to demur from including. This is not a full list, but they might include social workers, as several Members have mentioned; psychiatric nurses, particularly when they are on an interaction; those who work for Border Force; people involved with public transport; and our local authority staff. We talk about ambulances, but I am not quite sure whether those who volunteer for St John Ambulance would be covered.

Chris Bryant indicated assent.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman nods, and I note that, as does the Minister.

I am also tempted to include traffic wardens, who are not always the sort of people we cheer for, but they do good work enforcing parking regulations, and they often suffer a huge amount of abuse from people who are caught.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made me think about our armed forces. We have all read of instances when people in uniform in our constituencies have come under attack from those who do not hold our military personnel in high regard.

I am particularly pleased to see prison officers included in clause 3(1)(d). I have Guys Marsh prison in my constituency, and my hon. Friend the Minister has visited it with me. He and I heard first hand from some of the prison officers there of the day in, day out degrading behaviour they have to suffer at the hands of some prisoners. It would be good if, as a result of the Bill becoming an Act, which I very much hope it will, those who perpetrated entirely unnecessary attacks on our prison officers could have their tariffs increased somehow.

I close as I opened, by congratulating the hon. Members for Rhondda and for Halifax. I agree that it is a shame that the House will not divide today, because we need to make sure that the people in the country who are interested in this issue know that the Bill has the full, wholehearted and full-throated support of both sides of the House.

11.59 am

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I rise to make three points in welcoming this Bill and seeing, I hope, the House at its best in coming together on something that we all clearly agree on.
On Friday night, three police officers were injured breaking up a brawl in Boston, one of them seriously. Subsequent comments on Facebook included, “The only thing I’m disappointed in is that the other two coppers didn’t get knocked down as well.” While there were more responsible people saying, for example, “Police officers are willing to help anybody and that’s why they put on their uniform”, that underlines why such legislation is necessary. We tell ourselves in this place that everyone is on the side of our public servants, but frankly that is not always the case. I pay tribute to Constables Mike Redfern, Michael Rooke and Dan Lewis, who were injured on Friday night in the course of their duties. This legislation is clearly vital.

Much has been said about the definition of an emergency worker, and it will surprise nobody that I would like to chip in a couple of extra suggestions. I agree with a lot of what has been said about social workers. I would add—not simply because my mum was a nurse and I am married to a doctor—that our general practitioners are often at their most vulnerable when they are alone in a room with a patient who may be seeking emergency treatment with an on-the-day appointment. I urge the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the Minister to consider whether workers in the NHS more broadly, who are often also providing emergency care, should be considered in this. I think, having declared my interest, that particular consideration should be given to GPs, because they are often particularly vulnerable.

It is extremely good news to see the inclusion of prison officers such as those serving at North Sea Camp prison in my constituency, and the RNLI, which does hugely valuable work on a voluntary basis. In Lincolnshire we are lucky to have an RNLI that thrives and does exceptional work. Apart from having to deal with prank calls, they often find that the people who benefit from their work, in sometimes extraordinary circumstances, do not always appreciate it as much as they should.

Holly Lynch: The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful speech. He makes a very valid point about the RNLI. I recently visited the RNLI at the Tower on the Thames and saw the unique circumstances that it faces. Predominantly, people end up in the Thames because they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or because they have attempted to self-harm or commit suicide, and the RNLI meets a great deal of resistance from the people it seeks to assist. I am really pleased that we have been able to incorporate protections for it within the Bill.

Matt Warman: I absolutely agree. It is a testament to the thought that has already gone into this Bill that we are not asking whether we should add the RNLI. However, the hon. Member for Rhondda was right to say that while we might wish to protect every public servant in one go, there is a risk that the Bill becomes a sort of spine on which we hang a huge number of professions. We do not want a whole load of unintended consequences when, as I think we all agree, this is a very good Bill for us all to support. The more we can do that, the better a place we will end up in.

I welcome this Bill hugely. I very much hope that it can be refined in Committee. I put in a special word for my wife, specifically, and for GPs in general.

12.3 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate—no thank, because he does not want me to do that—the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for all the work that they do here.

As we have heard, there is currently protection within the law for anybody who is the victim of assault, and protection in the enhanced sentencing regime guidelines for anybody who is carrying out the work of public service, so why do we need to change the law? The NHS England statistics on assaults tell us why. In 2011-12, there were 59,744 assaults on workers in the NHS in England, and that figure rose to 70,555 in 2016. Quite clearly, the law is not working.

Without wanting to take up too much time, I will refer to some of the feedback I have received from the A&E department in the area of east Sussex that I represent. Here are a few examples from just one doctor:

“Held in a room with a patient threatening me with scissors. Punched in the face on my first emergency department job. One of my juniors got held up against the wall by a bloke who called her a slut and spat in her face. Recently threatened by a bloke I was stuck in a room with whilst pregnant. Sure I could think of more.”

There are many similar examples.

That takes me to the point that I would really like the hon. Member for Rhondda to think about in Committee. How much consideration has been given to the question of how many of the 70,555 offences against NHS staff would be covered by the draft legislation? Would they all be covered because they are all within the sphere of emergency services? Do they all count as emergency workers, or are the vast proportion of them outside that sphere, because they work in other wards and non-emergency settings? If they are outside it, I ask the hon. Gentleman whether it would be worth widening the scope of the Bill to extend the protection to non-emergency services so that it covers not just emergency workers, but those who do other, related, healthcare work. If the Bill covers all those who need protection, I will absolutely welcome it.

I recognise that there is a danger of extending the scope so much that it covers practically all public sector workers. We could well end up with additional enhancements for everyone bar lawyers and estate agents—God forbid—in which case we would have lost sight of the original drift. I ask for the Bill to cover hospitals, and to ensure that the NHS is a safe place, because the situation has got out of control, as the figures show. Those who work in the NHS deserve our protection, but the number of assaults on NHS workers show that something has gone wrong. I would like the NHS as a whole to be given this special protection to send a strong message that such assaults will not be tolerated. We must do everything that is necessary to show people that the NHS is a profession in which they will be safe and in which we want them to work.

I would be delighted to work with the hon. Gentleman on the Bill. I absolutely support it, and I look forward to the possibility that the definitions will be widened in Committee to give this protection to even more people.

12.7 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am delighted to support this Bill, not only because the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and I are rarely on the same
side of something that is discussed in this place, but because a few months ago the all-party group on alcohol harm, which I chair, published “The Frontline Battle: An Inquiry into the Impact of Alcohol on Emergency Services”. It is a catalogue of attacks on police, fire, ambulance and hospital staff.

Throughout our inquiry, we heard countless first-hand accounts of the physical and emotional challenges for emergency service personnel of responding day in, day out, to alcohol-fuelled incidents. It is completely unacceptable that every 13 seconds a police officer is assaulted in the line of duty. It is unacceptable that medical staff have TVs thrown at them, or that an A&E consultant is kicked in the face. Assaults on people who work in these crucial areas should not be without consequence. We heard about police officers who were assaulted while breaking up drunken street fights, pumping the stomach of a young person and tackling house fires caused or exacerbated by alcohol-induced forgetfulness. We heard about our frontline emergency service staff being attacked day in and day out.

What really interested me was that the report received nationwide press coverage. It was covered not only by several national newspapers, but by breakfast TV. However much as we in this House may like to think that all-party groups are important—I am sure they are to all of us—it is very rare for them to receive such national coverage. That is a reflection of the public concern about this issue.

We also learned how much such behaviour—attacks on emergency personnel, fuelled by the fact that people have drunk excess alcohol—has a significant impact on the morale and health and wellbeing of those in our emergency services. We were shocked to hear how emergency services personnel were depressed, with some of them leaving the services simply because they could not tolerate any further assaults on such a scale.

One police force told us its staff survey showed that “90 per cent of police officers expect to be assaulted on a Friday or Saturday night when they police during the night time economy.” I was really shocked by an account involving female police officers going into licensed premises while policing the night-time economy:

“There is one thing that is specific to female officers and that is sexual assault. I can take my team through a licensed premise, and by the time I take them out the other end, they will have been felt up several times.”

That is completely unacceptable.

Frontline officers are in the firing line. Some 86% of police officers surveyed in the north-east told us they have been assaulted by people who had been drinking, and 21% of them had been assaulted six or more times during their service. Over 52% of ambulance service staff whom we heard from had suffered sexual assaults or harassment while on duty. One submission to our inquiry showed the devastating impact that assaults can have:

“Assaults can affect workers both physically and mentally: some frontline emergency staff have moved on to work in other fields. Others are forced into early retirement as a result of stress, or medically discharged.”

A hospital trust has recorded that in one year just three of its patients were responsible for more than 100 assaults on staff each. The Bill is necessary to protect the protectors. As I have said, making this an aggravated offence will stop patients such as those three each being able, time and again, to assault more than 100 staff members in one hospital without facing a penalty for such behaviour. There has to be a deterrent, and the Bill sends the message that this behaviour is not acceptable and will no longer be tolerated.

12.13 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I have been told that congratulations are not necessary, so I will move swiftly on to say that I join everyone in the Chamber in saying that we should protect our protectors. Emergency workers deserve the respect of all of us as they do all they can to keep us safe. I am here today to support the Bill, and I add my voice to those of all Members in sending the very strong message that attacks on emergency workers are unacceptable and will not be tolerated, and that the full weight of the law will be applied to those who attack emergency workers to make them pay for their crime.

The Bill will provide the police and the courts with the powers they need to deal effectively with those who use violence against hard-working emergency workers. I have again been surprised to hear so many horrific stories today about the violence meted out to people who are just going about their work to protect and serve us. I want to take a moment to thank emergency workers in East Sussex, and especially in my constituency of Wealden, whether they work in the fire, ambulance or police services, or in one of my community hospitals in Crowborough and Uckfield. They should not have to go about their work under the threat of violence.

The crucial changes in the Bill send a clear message that attacks on emergency workers will not be tolerated. We must guarantee that our emergency workers, especially those on the frontline who are responding to life and death situations, and those upholding the law have the full protection of the law when carrying out their duties. Attacking a person serving the public is already an aggravated offence. As I have said, making this an aggravated offence will stop patients such as those three each being able, time and again, to assault more than 100 staff members in one hospital without facing a penalty for such behaviour. There has to be a deterrent, and the Bill sends the message that this behaviour is not acceptable and will no longer be tolerated.

I hope that the Bill will give victims of this crime the confidence to come forward, and that it will deter those who are violent towards public service and emergency workers. I hope it will help in the recruitment and retention of staff, given that we are trying to get more people into such jobs in the first place. I also hope that it will stop those members of the public who think it is okay to go out and attack an emergency worker, feeling that they will not be dealt with in any way whatsoever.

I welcome in particular the clauses proposing powers to take blood and saliva samples from people who have spat at or bitten emergency workers and exposed them to risk of infection. We have heard how traumatic that can be, not only for the individual victims but for their families.

I want to talk briefly about a case that took place in East Sussex. It has a couple of distressing aspects: the perpetrator was just 18 years old and she did damage to not just one but two police officers. The police officers were called out to an incident at a home and tried to control this young woman, who was in a fight with her mother. As she was restrained on the ground, the young
girl—she was just 18—cleared her throat and spat in a
PC’s face. Unfortunately, the violence continued and both
police officers were attacked.

The Sussex Police Federation called that attack “disgusting”, and Matt Webb, chairman of the federation,
said:

“We hear about these attacks on officers in Sussex weekly, if
daily, just for doing their job—which is absolutely unacceptable.

Spitting at officers is a particularly vile act and that is why we
are grateful to Sussex Police for being one of the first forces to
issues spit-guards to officers to place over the heads of suspects if
they had been spitting, to prevent them committing any further
offences.”

In another incident, a female police officer was attacked
with a hammer. I am concerned at the tone being set by
some perpetrators, who think it is okay to attack our
public service workers.

In conclusion, I support the Bill and am grateful for
the opportunity to thank emergency workers across the
country, especially those in my constituency. This Bill
and today’s debate send a clear message that violence
against emergency workers is unacceptable and will not
be tolerated.

12.16 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): If the
hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will not accept
our congratulations or thanks, let us then acknowledge
his work and that of the hon. Member for Halifax
(Holly Lynch), as well as that of previous Administrations
who have worked on this particular topic and of those
responsible for taking this Bill through the House. It
was interesting to hear how the hon. Gentleman conducted
his own ballot to find which topic the public supported
most for a private Member’s Bill.

The Bill and today’s contributions send a clear signal
from this House that certain attitudes towards and
attacks on emergency workers will not be tolerated.
Emergency workers are among the most respected people
in this country. They should be able to do their job in
the knowledge that if anyone assaults them while they
carry out their duties, the persecutor will be punished.
My own sister is a nurse, although not in the emergency
sector, and I would not wish to think that she was doing
her job without adequate protections and safeguards.

I have done some research on emergency workers and
frontline staff in the west midlands and my own
constituency. In the west midlands in 2016-17, there
were 1,312 recorded assaults against officers. That is the
second largest number of attacks, by police force area,
with only the Metropolitan police recording a higher
number. Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust recorded
175 assaults in 2015-16, which equates to 3.5% of staff
being attacked. We have to remember that behind every
police officer, fire officer and nurse who is assaulted,
there is a partner, husband, wife or family. As we have
heard, they are equally affected.

I will turn briefly to the Bill’s specifics—I must get my
read my pieces of paper in the right order. This is the disadvantage in having one’s speech
curtailed.

There has been a lot of debate about clause 3 and the
definition of “emergency workers”, and I mentioned
earlier an assault on a constituent of mine who is a
refuse collector. We need to look very closely at that
definition. For example, are members of the armed forces
under Operation Temperer covered under the Bill? I am
not quite sure, so I ask the Minister to confirm that in
his winding-up speech.

Mike Hill: I hope the definition will include the civil
nuclear police, too.

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman highlights the
need to look at the specifics of the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth
Johnson) highlighted the need to look beyond emergency
workers in accident and emergency. We have heard
about minor injuries units, but what about nurses on
wards? Could they be included in the Bill?

It is very important for the Bill to undergo line-by-line
scrutiny in Committee so we can get it right. We have an
excellent opportunity not just to send the right message,
but to protect the people who need our protection most.
What we have heard today, and what we have seen in
our own constituencies, is absolutely not to be tolerated.
That message must go out loud and clear, and be backed
up by legislation that works to protect our frontline
services.

12.21 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I am
not going to thank the hon. Member for Rhondda
(Chris Bryant) but I am going to pay tribute to him, and
to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who has
worked so very hard on this issue.

I was not planning to speak—that may have been to
the relief of everyone in the Chamber—but I have been
moved to do so by the examples given, and the strength
of feeling displayed, by Members right across the House.
This is one of those wonderful occasions in this place
when we do the right thing and come together to make
real change that will help real people in our constituencies
who make such a difference to our lives.

I would like to pay tribute to Lincolnshire police, who
this summer, in the largest ever slavery case, managed to
secure the convictions of eight people from the same
family who had enslaved vulnerable people and treated
them despicably—very violently. The police managed to
secure not only convictions, but sentences totalling 80 years.
The police showed great bravery, which they show on a
daily basis, walking into caravans and houses. I hope
the Bill will go some way to supporting that bravery.

My constituency is very rural, which means that
often when there is a medical emergency it is not paramedics
who come to people’s assistance but volunteer first
responders, in particular volunteers for LIVES, which
is based in Horncastle. I am delighted that clause 3(2)
covers not just paramedics who are formally employed
by the NHS, but volunteer first responders who help
the NHS. I join colleagues who have set out food for
thought on issues such as a maximum sentence for
conviction on indictment in saying that the Bill Committee
needs to examine such issues. I too would happily sit on
the Committee, if the hon. Member for Rhondda needs
further help.

I will finish with the words of a constituent who
works for Lincolnshire police. He puts it far better than
I can:

“We deserve to be able to go home to our families and not be
injured or worse.”
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Just as for other sons and daughters of emergency service workers, the Bill has a particular resonance for me. In the nearly 30 years that my father served with West Midlands police, he suffered various injuries. Some resulted from accidents in the line of work, but too many were the result of physical assaults: being hit around the head with a stool in a central Birmingham bar, being pulled off a police motorbike and hooligans trying to pull him off a police horse during a football riot. There were too many other incidents that he saw first-hand, such as the Handsworth riots. He saw rioters assaulting the paramedics, ambulance workers and firefighters who were trying to save lives and put out fires right in the middle of the riot zone.

Sadly, as we all know—as I certainly know, not only from the patrols on which I have joined my local police, but from the emails that I have received from serving emergency workers—such assaults happen far too regularly. The emergency workers at whom the Bill is aimed choose to wear their uniforms. They dedicate their careers to putting other people first, and we must ensure that the Bill puts them first. It is precisely because we need the Crown Prosecution Service to succeed in its aim of ensuring that these particularly appalling crimes attract suitably strong punishments that we must also ensure that the perpetrators are charged effectively.

Adam Aston, a Dudley Labour councillor, has served as a paramedic for 13 years. He tells me that he has been assaulted twice during that time, and that on neither occasion did the Crown Prosecution Service choose to press charges. If the Bill is to be effective, we must ensure that this is not simply another offence for which the Crown Prosecution Service will not prosecute.

I hope that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the Minister will work together on both prosecuting and sentencing guidelines. Our public sector workers regularly put themselves between us and danger, and we, as legislators, must ensure that we put the law firmly on their side.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is a particularly shy and retiring type, and I am sorry to do this to him, but I must congratulate him and thank him for the work that he has done. He made a powerful and compelling case for the Bill. I also thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who laid all the groundwork for the campaign, and who did so much work to help the Bill to reach this stage. I thank the Police Federation for its work as well.

This has been possibly one of the most successful campaigns in parliamentary history. It was launched only in February this year, and now the Bill is being given its Second Reading. I thank Unison, the GMB, Unite and the Prison Officers Association, which have been working closely with my Justice colleagues. Most of all, however, I thank our brave emergency service workers, who, when the worst happens, put themselves in harm’s way to protect us all.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Speaking as a former Unison officer who represented those emergency workers on the frontline and, all too often, responded to reports about assaults on them, I am pleased that the debate is taking place. Does my hon. Friend agree that while the Bill is long overdue, the broad support for it on both sides of the House is extremely welcome?

Louise Haigh: I could not agree more.

This year has placed unprecedented demands on our emergency services, but, despite all the undeniable pressures that they are under because of a range of issues—with which I shall deal shortly—they have stepped up without fail, and we have seen them at their very best. Keith Palmer paid the ultimate price when defending us in this very building while we ran for safety. Wayne Marques, equipped only with a baton, ran headlong at the terrorists who attacked us on London Bridge. Countless paramedics, A&E staff, nurses and firefighters saved lives and acted with unmatched bravery and compassion in response to Grenfell and Manchester. Sadly, this has been a year in which we have asked too much of our emergency service workers too often. It is not too much to ask of us that we protect them in law, and allow them to do the job that they desperately want to do: the job of protecting and serving our communities, for which we are so grateful.

Everything that we have heard this morning has made clear why the Bill is necessary. We have heard the harrowing, emotional stories of officers, nurses and paramedics who have been subjected to the most vile and unprovoked abuse, and the effect that it has had on them physically, mentally and emotionally. We have heard about the personal experiences of Members who have served as emergency workers themselves, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), and others whose families have served: the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) and the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—and a compelling case has just been made by the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood).

If I may, I would like to add an experience from my constituency. Last year, PC Lisa Bates went to a routine call of domestic violence and, on attending the property, found a man who was in a psychotic state. He attacked her with an axe; she fell down two flights of stairs, grappling with him; he chopped off several of her fingers. She is still recovering at home, and I am sure the House will join me in wishing her a full recovery.

What no police officer, nurse, firefighter or paramedic should ever expect—what should never be normalised for them—is being assaulted in the line of duty. That is what the Bill seeks to challenge: the attitude, which sadly exists across the criminal justice system, that being punched or kicked is somehow to be expected and accepted. Well, it is not. The tougher sentences in the Bill are long overdue, the broad support for it on both sides of the House is extremely welcome.

As we have heard, an assault on a police officer takes place as frequently as every 13 seconds; there were 70,000 assaults on NHS staff last year and fire crews are attacked 10 times every week on average. These figures are shockingly huge and they are growing year on year, as is the disgusting practice of spitting at
emergency workers. Interestingly, I have been spat at as a politician, but I was never spat at in my time as a serving police officer. I therefore appreciate, and I know the House does, why clause 4 is vital for workers whose lives have been made a living hell waiting for test results after being spat at. The clause will lessen the trauma of that wait and provide them with assurances as quickly as possible that they have not contracted any communicable diseases. The stories that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax told about the affected officers and the impact on their families were truly shocking, and I know they moved the House. I had the privilege earlier this week of meeting those officers, who are back at work, serving their communities. They are a credit to their force.

It has been fantastic to see such cross-party support for the Bill today, from all parties across the House. I add my thanks to the sponsors and to the Government for allowing the Bill to pass through to Committee. I reiterate the call that my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda made for the Committee stage to take place on the Floor of the House, given that there have been so many enthusiastic volunteers today to take part in Committee.

Emergency workers will be watching the debate with interest and will be heartened to hear so many voices speaking up for them, as I know they can feel neglected and taken for granted. However, I would not be doing my job if I did not also use this opportunity to highlight the other pressures they are under and some of the reasons assaults have increased so significantly in recent years. The NHS, as we know, is under unbelievable pressure and is struggling to cope with limited resources. Waiting times for A&E are up and hospitals are failing to meet their targets. Ambulance services across the country are simply unable to meet the demand they face and prison officers are near breaking point, in prisons that are not fit for purpose, while all of them continue to face pay cuts, on top of the thousands that have been taken off their salaries over the last seven years.

Our police are facing unprecedented demand from rising crime, as yesterday’s figures revealed: rising violent crime, a terrorist threat that is now relentless, soaring numbers of 999 and 101 calls, and unsustainable demand thanks to cuts to services elsewhere. The Metropolitan police receive a call related to mental health every five minutes. In 2012, West Yorkshire police were looking for 118 missing persons a week. That figure is now 450. The police are now constantly being asked to attend to vulnerable people when they are not the appropriate agency to do so.

Among all this, we have lost 20,000 officers and 30,000 police staff. Neighbourhood policing has been decimated, and just yesterday Norfolk police force announced that it was abolishing every single one of its PCSOs. Single crewing is the norm, PCSOs are being asked to go to jobs that are appropriate only for PCs, long-term sickness and mental health issues are through the roof, and morale is at rock bottom. The only way to fix these issues is to resource the police and all our public services properly. We can never truly protect them unless they have the capacity and the support to deal with the many and varied situations that their job throws at them.

If we are to do everything we can to protect those workers, I would beg the Justice Minister to take this away from the debate. We are so grateful to the Government for their support for the Bill. We look forward to improving it together even more in Committee and to its speedy implementation, but we are also desperate for more resource in the Budget next month. Without it, I genuinely fear that our emergency services will not survive as we know them.

I know that we will return to this debate and that neither I nor my colleagues in Health or Justice, or the many champions from the Back Benches, will let the issue drop. In closing, I therefore reiterate my congratulations to my hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda and for Halifax and my thanks to the Government, to all the supporters and, again, to all our emergency service workers. Every day that they put on their uniforms, they risk their lives to protect ours. These people do not act without fear; they act in spite of it. That is why we call them heroes.

12.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is in typically bawdy mood, but I still congratulate him on coming top of the private Member’s Bill ballot and on using that coveted position to introduce a Bill on such an important topic. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on her tireless work in championing the “Protect the Protectors” campaign. The public voted in an online poll to support this Bill, and it is therefore important that we deliver it.

As the son of a midwife, I know of the commitment and hard work shown every day by people working in the public sector. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), I know how it feels to grow up knowing that a parent could be attacked in the line of work, doing something they care about and to which they are committed.

Every day, emergency workers across the country show remarkable courage simply in carrying out their duties. They save lives, protect communities and uphold the law. We owe each and every one of them a debt of gratitude, and they deserve the full protection of the law. Introducing tougher sentences for such despicable attacks on emergency workers sends the clearest possible message that this cowardly behaviour will not be tolerated. That is why the Government support the Bill.

Michael Tomlinson: I know my hon. Friend has looked at the issue carefully, and he heard my intervention on the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). Sentences seem to be the same for summary offences as for indictable offences, so will he consider whether it is necessary to increase sentences for indictable offences?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). We will work through the detail in Committee, but the Bill deserves its Second Reading today.

I am humbled by the stories of bravery we have heard today. This year our emergency services have faced the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower, as well as horrific terrorist attacks. The murder of Police Constable Keith Palmer, outside this very building, is a shocking and tragic reminder to us all of how much our emergency workers do to protect us.
We must not forget that, as well as responding to major incidents, our frontline emergency workers—be they police or prison officers, firefighters, paramedics or other health workers—deal with challenging and unpredictable situations as part of their everyday working lives.

I was asked whether civil nuclear constabulary and Army personnel working in Operation Temperer will be covered by the Bill, and the answer is yes. They are engaged to provide services for police purposes, so the Bill will apply to them.

Although public attention often focuses on paramedics being abused by drunks in city centres, or on heroic police officers tackling violent criminals, behind prison walls our governors and frontline prison officers work daily with some of society’s most dangerous and troubled individuals. I have seen at first hand the courage shown by those committed men and women as they protect society. As with all emergency workers responding to critical situations, prison staff must be able to carry out their duties without fear of assault. They carry out their duties with incredible calmness and professionalism. I often pay tribute to them in this House, and I do so again today. I am pleased that the Bill will apply to them, too.

For some time now, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice have been working together, building an evidence base on what is happening on the ground and looking at what more we can do to protect our emergency workers. For the past two years, the Home Office has published provisional statistics on assaults on police officers, and sadly, as has been mentioned, they show that the numbers are increasing. In 2016-17, there were an estimated 24,000 assaults on police officers, which is a 7% increase on the 2015-16 figure. Assaults on prison officers also rose by a third last year and, in the acute experiences of those who assault prison officers, a 7% increase is significant.

Clause 1 creates, in effect, a new form of common assault where the assault is on an emergency worker. An offence committed in these circumstances will have, on indictment, a maximum penalty of 12 months’ imprisonment, which is double the current maximum penalty. That will give the courts the power to sentence in a way that reflects the seriousness of the assault. I have to stress, though, for those who may think even this new penalty is not sufficient, that we are talking here about common assault, the lowest level of assault, which may not involve any injury and can include as little as a single push. If the assault is more serious, it is likely to become actual bodily harm or grievous bodily harm, and those offences already have a five-year maximum penalty. So we are focused here on the lower-level offences, and the maximum penalty has to reflect that.

Clause 2 deals with other more serious assaults: those not covered by the new aggravated version of common assault. For those offences, actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm or even manslaughter, the Bill places a duty on the court to consider such an assault committed against an emergency worker as an aggravating factor in sentencing—that means to consider it as more serious, meriting an increased sentence within the maximum for the offence. The Bill also requires the court to make a finding that the offence was aggravated and to state this in open court. This puts on a statutory basis what we already see in sentencing guidelines. It is, however, a clear and unequivocal requirement on the court to take these offences seriously and to make clear to all concerned that it has done so.

I want briefly to mention the application of the Bill to emergency workers. The Bill, as the hon. Gentleman has said and as its title make clear, is about emergency workers and assaults on them while they are trying to carry out their daily duties. The Bill focuses on providing increased protection for emergency workers. These are people who have routinely to deal with difficult people and difficult situations simply as part of their job. That job exposes them to a degree of risk, and it is only right that we are seeking to strengthen their protection under the law. As we debate the Bill, we must keep our central objective—ensuring that emergency workers can carry out those critically important duties—firmly in mind.

It is important that we retain a focus on emergency workers, but this does not mean that the Government think other assaults are not serious. Our courts already consider the context for offences, and specifically when offences are committed against those serving the public. The current sentencing guidelines used by the courts make it clear that if any offence is “committed against those working in the public sector or providing a service to the public”, that should be considered as a factor increasing seriousness, indicating the need for a higher sentence within the maximum penalty. I welcome the work that the Sentencing Council has done and continues to do to make that consideration explicit in sentencing guidelines.

The third provision in the Bill relates to the testing of those who assault emergency workers. During the Committee stage of the Prisons and Courts Bill in the last Parliament, the hon. Member for Halifax raised...
this important matter. I said that the time that the Government were interested in looking at the issue but had to address some important practical and legal questions. I am happy to say that this Bill provides an opportunity to return to that commitment.

Unfortunately, those emergency workers who are bitten or spat at have to deal not only with the initial disgust and pain; in some cases, there might also be a concern that they have contracted a serious infectious disease. This can cause great distress and worry to the individuals and their families. It is simply not fair that the onus is currently on the emergency worker to have their own blood tested and to then potentially undergo further tests to help medical practitioners to assess whether they will develop a disease.

We therefore support the creation of a specific power for police officers to request blood and saliva samples from offenders in these cases. This will ensure that emergency workers are provided with better information regarding the likelihood that they have caught a disease. It will therefore reduce the number of occasions on which emergency workers themselves have to be tested and subsequently take medicines and endure periods of uncertainty about whether they have a disease. A blood sample will be taken only with consent. However, we agree that creating an offence of refusing to provide a blood sample for this purpose without good reason will help to ensure that offenders comply with these requests.

We want to continue to work with the hon. Member for Rhondda and with the police and other emergency services to ensure that the Bill’s proposals are both practical and affordable. I thank the Police Federation for the work that it has done in this context. We also want to work with our Welsh counterparts as the Bill progresses through Parliament, to ensure that this legislation works effectively in Wales.

Let me conclude by again thanking the hon. Member for Rhondda—he does not get thanks from me very often, so he should accept it on this occasion—for ensuring that this first Friday sitting considering private Members’ Bills has been so well spent. This is not a party political issue; it is an issue that affects us all. We have heard constituency cases from across the House today reflecting that fact. That is why I am pleased that we are working together to protect these key public servants. Introducing tougher sentences for despicable attacks on emergency workers sends the clearest possible message that those attacks will not be tolerated. I commend the many staff associations that have worked hard to push the issues in the Bill to the fore. We look forward to debating the provisions further as the Bill progresses through the House.

12.48 pm

Chris Bryant: With the leave of the House, I should like to respond to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and I have received so many congratulations, thanks and tributes today that I feel as though we are now married. This is made even more confusing by the fact that her partner is also called Chris. It would be quite surprising—[Interruption.] All right, calm down! It has been good that nobody has tried to talk the Bill out today or tried to keep the debate going for unnecessary purposes. Every Member who has spoken has done so either because they wanted to pay tribute to the emergency workers in their own constituency, because they had particular stories that they wanted to tell or because they had identified issues that they felt the Bill still needed to address.

I have a short list of the issues that I think we will need to address in Committee. One is the definition of emergency workers, which has been referred to by several people. There is a question of whether we should extend it to include other NHS workers, PCSOs and custody officers, for example. I am keen, however, not to extend it so far that we do not throw a cordon sanitaire, as it were, around our emergency workers specifically.

Secondly, as the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said, we will need to consider the reference in clause 1 to “in the exercise of functions as such a worker”. We will need to make sure that that does not become a loophole or a “get out” clause for those who attack or assault our emergency workers.

The third area to consider is the list of offences that can be aggravated. Members might think it a slightly odd list. There is a rationale for it, but we should perhaps consider other offences, such as those under the Public Order Act, which several hon. Members have referred to. As I have said to several people, I am keen not to make the issue of spitting and biting one that adds stigma in particular to those with HIV. If that were to be an outcome of the Bill, I would not want it on the statute book. I am keen to get that right, so we might need to amend that clause. In addition, as I understand it, the Government have signified that a money resolution, and consequently clause 7, will not be necessary, so we will have to remove that clause in Committee.

I want to tell one brief story. A bit like my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax, a few years ago I was caught up in an incident. It was around the time that the foxhunting legislation was going through Parliament. I was going to a fundraising event in Cardiff—my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) was there as well—and as I arrived, there was a large number of foxhunting activists outside the hotel where it was happening. They saw me from a distance and started chasing me, shouting all sorts of obscenities at me. They clearly wanted to—well, I do not think they wanted to have a conversation, let’s put it that way.

I am very grateful to the police, who bundled me into the back of a van and locked the doors. You could not see inside the van from outside and the people chasing me disappeared for a while. Unfortunately, the police forgot they put me in the van. [Laughter.] About two hours later, I managed to get through to 999 to be released from the police van, by which time I was in terrible need of a toilet. [Laughter.] There is a serious point to this story. We then decided to get to the event through the back door. We created a phalanx of police officers—in front, to the side and behind—with riot shields to get me into the hotel. Incidentally, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East was no use at all—she was not answering her phone.

Anyway, the police were trying to get me in, and one of the police officers was of Chinese background. Suddenly, the demonstrators saw us trying to get in through the
back and started throwing stones, bricks and all sorts of things at us. At one point, they started shouting at the police officer I referred to, calling her—not my words—a “Chinky pig” and punching her. I am grateful to the police for getting me in, but what struck me when I was thinking about this last night was that although it was an aggravating factor that the attack on her was racially motivated, it was not an aggravating factor—it would have been had our Bill been law—that she was a police officer. That is all I want to do in the Bill—to put hate crimes and hatred of and assaults on our emergency workers on the same footing.

I am enormously grateful to everybody here today. I know how difficult it is when there are competing constituency events, especially for those from far-flung constituencies, particularly in Wales. I am also grateful for the Minister’s offer to progress the Bill as fast as possible. There are means, if the Government choose to adopt them, to get the Bill on the statute book by Easter next year. Let us see if we cannot do that together.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Losing a child is the most harrowing experience that could ever happen to any parent. As a father of four myself, I know personally that it is every mother and father’s worst fear, and one that never goes away. I am conscious that many Members present have personal experience of this subject. I am grateful for their incredible courage in highlighting the issue, for all their work in Parliament to help others in similar circumstances, and for their participation in today’s debate. We had a general debate on baby loss during Baby Loss Awareness Week last week, and I am pleased that we have time to debate this important and sensitive issue again today, so soon after such an important week in the calendar.

I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]—for so successfully bringing this issue to the fore with his private Member’s Bill in the previous Session, which served as the catalyst for the progress we have made in reaching this point. I thank the all-party groups that have been involved, particularly the one on baby loss. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for all their work.

I also thank the all-party group for children who need palliative care, and charities such as Child Bereavement UK, Bliss, Together for Short Lives and Jack’s Rainbow, and all the other charitable organisations that do important work on this issue, not only to champion bereaved parents but to raise awareness. Of course, I thank the parents themselves, including from my constituency Annika and James Dowson, who first drew my attention to how baby loss is managed in many hospitals and how so much more could be done to help with the initial stages of grief and loss.

I am delighted that this is one of those issues for which there is cross-party support. Such consensus is right and important, and I hope it enables us to make positive progress with the Bill. I have been working closely with the excellent Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), with her Department and officials, and with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, to create a Bill that is fair and beneficial to those who will need to rely on it. I am grateful for the Government’s support.

The successful passage of the Bill will ensure that we are able to put in place a new provision and level of protection so that those who find themselves in this awful situation in future know that, at a minimum, they will be entitled to time off work to grieve, without their suffering any detriment. We know that there are some brilliant, supportive and flexible employers out there, and I commend them for the support that they provide to their employees when these circumstances occur. But we also know that some employers operate at the other end of the spectrum, and it is those employers we need to consider when putting this legislation in place.
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for taking forward the excellent work begun by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) in the previous Session. He rightly says that most employers would grant leave under such terrible circumstances, were it asked for. Is not the point of the Bill that no parent should, in almost unimaginably horrible and difficult circumstances, have to make such a request and fear what the answer might be?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, most employers do the right thing, working with the people affected so that they get whatever support and time off they need, and maintaining their levels of pay throughout that period of time.

During our consultations on the Bill, our excellent parliamentary digital engagement team facilitated a Facebook debate, in which I took part. Some charities and the campaign organisation, 38 Degrees, also provided us with a number of examples of employers and line managers who offered inappropriate levels of support. For instance, a parent told us that their employer—an NHS body—offered them only five days’ leave following the sudden passing of their youngest daughter, with an additional time having to be taken as annual leave. Brendan from Newcastle told us that he did not get any paid leave and was sacked nine months later. Gillian from Milton Keynes did not receive the appropriate support when she lost her daughter 13 years ago. She told us that the measures proposed in the Bill would have meant that she and her partner could have grieved together, and provided help and support for their other children.

No employee should even have to think about being at work when they desperately need some time away to grieve for a lost child. Yet according to a Rainbow Trust survey, around 9% of parents said that their employer was not at all supportive. I ask those employers to consider their position. What is the point of having a parent in the workplace who has had no time off to grieve? What effect do those employers think it has on the bereaved parents’ attitude to their workplace and, indeed, on other people in the workplace? I strongly recommend that all employers and managers read the excellent ACAS guidelines on bereavement, which clearly detail best practice for financial and emotional support.

I will now set out the detail of the Bill. The Bill will provide two weeks’ leave for all employees who lose a child below the age of 18. This will be a day-one right. Those key points are established on the face of the Bill, which deliberately leaves some other details to regulations. This leave will be protected and a person should suffer no form of detriment in the event that they find themselves having to take the leave. Crucially, the Bill will give parents an important choice, allowing them to make a decision on what is best for their needs, when they might otherwise be reliant on the good will of their employer.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am very, very happy to say that it has never happened to me, and I grieve for all those to whom it has happened. I have heard of other cases where young men and women have been killed, and sometimes the parents do not want to stop working. They do not have to stop working if they feel that continuing may be better in helping them to get over the loss.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The key to the Bill is that it retains that flexibility. There should be a discussion and negotiation, and the employer should provide the employee with support in order to help that person to decide what is best for them. It may be that the leave is taken later, rather than straightaway. People have different needs when dealing with their loss, as they do so in different ways and at different times.

The Bill also deals with paid leave. Leave will be paid, as a minimum, at the statutory rate—currently £140.98 a week or 90% of average weekly earnings where that is lower—for those who have fulfilled the qualifying period of 26 weeks’ service with the same employer the week before the date of their child’s passing away.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and for Colchester (Will Quince) on all their work on the Bill. I wish it well. I have just one question. Will these rights also cover adoptive parents?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We have left some details out of the Bill to allow more time for consultation on topics just like that one. Clearly the legislation cannot just be about biological parents. Adoptive parents should get the same benefits that the Bill provides. There are other such circumstances to discuss, so we want the maximum possible opportunity for consultation and submission of evidence, and for debate on these matters so that we ensure that we get the Bill right.

Leave will be paid at the statutory rate for those who fulfil the qualifying period of 26 weeks’ service the week before the child’s passing away. The Bill allows the rate to be set in regulations so that it can be uprated regularly in the normal way, but that is the level at which I envisage the rate will be set. That mirrors existing family leave and pay provisions, such as paternity leave, shared parental leave, adoption leave, and maternity leave after the first six weeks. That strikes a fair balance between the rights of the employee and a workable framework for the employer, but it is clearly the minimum we would expect the employer to provide.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) talked about flexibility, and that is my next point. It is widely recognised that grief affects people in different ways and at different times, and that there are no set rules for how and when to grieve. A level of flexibility over when to take this leave will allow an employee to take it at a time that best suits them, within a fixed period following the bereavement.

Hon. Members will have different opinions about how long that period should be, and there is clearly a balance to be struck between the individual needs of a bereaved employee and the employer’s need for a level of certainty around absences from work so that they can manage those effectively. With that in mind, the Bill provides for the window to be set in regulations, with a minimum of eight weeks within which these two weeks of leave must be taken.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his kind and generous words. I know we had a conversation about this in drafting the Bill, and
I welcome the 56 days, but we know that fathers, in particular, often bottle up grief and can have issues further down the line, so I would ask that we consider extending the period to six months. I appreciate the concerns about employers, but that would give parents flexibility.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and there are so many different circumstances—in certain circumstances, a funeral may be delayed. We need to consider that issue, and I am keen to hear views on it.

Eligibility is another area we need to have a debate on. In terms of my current thinking on who is considered to be a parent, the Government and I did quite a lot of consultation over the summer. It was apparent early on that the issue of who is a parent is key to ensuring the right people are reached and to the success of the Bill.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes two good points in one—that self-employed people are treated differently in relation to various aspects of maternity and paternity leave, and that the Taylor review is considering some of these issues. We should consider this issue in the framework of the Taylor review. We should see what recommendations come from that review and then perhaps look to change these provisions if there is consensus on that.

An obvious starting point on eligibility is for the provision to apply to the biological parents of the child who has passed away. However, it is unrealistic to suggest that all family units look exactly the same; that is too simplistic an approach. As a society, we have clearly moved on from mum, dad and 2.4 children. Children now live in many different situations, with caring responsibilities divided up in different ways, depending on different life circumstances. A child could have a number of parental figures in their life, all of whom are equally attached to them and, therefore, potentially equally devastated if they pass away.

I will not be so bold as to say that pinning down a wider definition of “parent” is easy. I do not expect we will do that today or even during the passage of the Bill. We need to take considered opinion on the issue and to allow further debate on it. Therefore, in the Bill’s later stages, I propose that we take time for consideration and the submission of evidence, that we debate this point widely, and that we bring forward the necessary regulations, as provided for in the Bill, once that consideration has been undertaken.

First, we need to ensure that we put in place a clear framework so that everyone clearly understands whether the entitlement to leave applies under these circumstances. That will take a little more time. I am very conscious that many different issues can and will form part of the overall debate during the Bill’s passage. We are likely to hear about the desire for parity between the self-employed and the employed, and questions about what other measures can be put in place to support parents at such a devastating time. These issues, and no doubt many more, will form the basis for a wider debate about what can and should be done in this area.

I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House share my desire to ensure that the Bill succeeds and makes quick progress. As we all know, a certain fragility accompanies the private Member’s Bill process. I would like to navigate that as best and as quickly as I can, with the help and support of Members across the House. Collectively, we have the opportunity to effect real change. It is our duty to ensure that those who will need to rely on this provision are able to do so at the earliest opportunity.

1.11 pm

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I lost my daughter a few years ago; she was an adult. You never get over it—you just get used to it and live with it. I was employed by United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust and I had a phased return to work. They were just marvellous—I can never thank them enough. It makes such a difference, having that chance to grieve.

I completely support this Bill, and I am really grateful that everybody else seems to be supporting it, but I have a few things I want to ask. First, there is a worry that people on zero-hours contracts might not meet the number of hours required to get the statutory benefits. I wonder if we might give some thought to having an average of the past 12 months’ earnings, particularly if the person has had time off to care for a sick child. Secondly, perhaps the age criteria with regard to the loss of a disabled child ought to be raised to recognise the lifelong responsibility of somebody who cares for a disabled child.

Thirdly, I met somebody from Bliss yesterday, who said that people on universal credit ought to be able to have some sort of entitlement, because if they lose a child, they need time to grieve as well. I am told that the way things are at the moment, they can be sanctioned. They can go to appeal and probably win, but the problem is losing the money in the first place. We have had the whole universal credit debate, so perhaps we could give some thought to that aspect.

Finally, on the time off that people take, my union, Unison, is suggesting that they have a week as a block and are then allowed to take odd days. You never know when you are going to have something come up like a funeral or a day when the grief just hits you, and you need a day off then.

1.12 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What an honour it is to follow the hon. Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee).

We are an example of employees, as it were. You are not our employer, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you are somebody with authority over us making adjustments to cope with grieving parents. We have very kindly been called at the beginning of this debate, because that really does help.
It is an enormous pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I am very pleased to have worked with my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince), and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), over the past couple of years on coping with the loss of a child and on how we can change the law, as well as change the conversation in society as a whole. It is therefore an enormous pleasure to speak as a co-sponsor of this Bill. I will not detain the House any more than I absolutely have to because we want to get on with it and get it passed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester did a lot of the spadework last year with his ten-minute rule Bill. I am sorry that that did not progress, but very pleased that the Government have had the opportunity to make a manifesto commitment to bring about this area of change. To me, as a former Government lawyer, the most exciting word in the Bill is “pay”. It is great that the Government is going to put its money where its mouth is and really support bereaved parents and their employers to cope when something very tragic happens. This Bill is about value. Historically, it has been up to the employer to decide how bereaved parents are treated. Although I have had excellent and supportive care from my employer, I know that that is not the case for everyone. I was sorry to hear of the examples that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton raised.

Grief can, to a certain extent, be managed. That is something that I was told by my consultant soon after I gave birth, and at the time I thought it was a ridiculous idea that anyone could ever put grief into a box and raise the lid only when it suited them. However, the similarity of experience among those who are bereaved is quite astounding. Grief is something that can be managed, and life can go on after something dreadful. It is so important that politicians and the Government put in place the legal mechanisms to enable that to happen as easily as possible.

In the early days, bereaved parents may well, depending on the circumstances, be suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder—they will certainly be suffering from shock—and they might need to tell and retell their story. They will have to deal with funerals and administration. They might have to deal with the police, inquests and all sorts of ghastly and unpleasant registration that no one thinks about before it happens to them.

It is particularly good that the grief of fathers is recognised in the Bill, because they have traditionally been overlooked. We know the very sad statistics about the high incidence of marital breakdown following a tragedy. Anything we can do to assist families to stay together must be done.

In the all-party group on baby loss we have worked very hard on the bereavement care pathway, and I am thrilled that we have brought the Government along with us. I think that counselling is a very valuable part of the recovery from a tragedy such as this, and anything we can do to build that into employment practice is worth doing. I was very lucky; I had a very supportive employer in the civil service. I had a job I loved, and I had sympathetic and imaginative colleagues. My own experience of grief certainly made me a better manager when the time came for me to help the people I worked with to manage their own tragic situations.

I do think that there is a role for good bereavement practice at work. I found it very helpful to know who knew what had happened, so one thing I introduced as a manager was to get everybody to sign a card that was given to the bereaved person as they returned to work, so that it was obvious that everybody knew what had happened and everybody acknowledged the extent of the tragedy. That enabled us all to move on and to have conversations, if appropriate—or not, if appropriate.

There are many things that employers can do to ease the burden, and I think the ACAS policies are a great place to start. It is important to recognise that members of staff will need extra support, possibly for many years. Anniversaries are difficult, although I think we often build them up in advance to be worse than they are on the day; they do not turn out to be quite as bad as we think they will be. We can all imagine scenarios that may be particularly difficult for those who have lost a child, including future pregnancies and the illness of other children in the family. A hospital visit of any kind can be very stressful for somebody who has been traumatised in hospital. I call on employers to do everything they can to try to imagine what it is like.

This is, however, a happy day for us. I offer many congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton, and to all of us who are supporting this Bill, I say, “Thank you.”

1.19 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and I agree with her that this is a happy day. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is a great day. I think I speak for everyone in this House when I say that we went into politics because we wanted to make a difference, whether it is to one person, one family, hundreds of people or thousands of people up and down the country. That is exactly why we do this job, and why we love it so much. Today is one of those days when I know we are making a difference. This will make a difference to the thousands of parents every year in this country who go through the personal tragedy of losing a child. As Members of Parliament, we have a duty and to some extent an obligation, where we can, to use our own personal experiences—good and bad—to improve the lot of others: to make sure that as few as possible people go through the sad experience, but also to make sure that those who do will have the best possible bereavement care and support available.

Thankfully, child loss in this country is as rare as it is tragic, but even so about 5,000 children die every year, and the parents need help and support. We would like to think that they got such support from their employers. Both my wife and I were very lucky to have employers who were excellent. They could not have done more, and we did take two weeks’ leave. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) rightly said, the vast majority of employers are brilliant. They act with compassion, care, kindness and sympathy. Sadly, however, some do not.

Since starting to research this issue nearly two years ago, shortly after entering this place, my inbox has, sadly, been full of cases of people who have been treated abhorrently. In fact, only this morning, after I appeared on “Good Morning Britain”, somebody sent me an email saying they were told they had to take a day’s holiday to attend their child’s funeral. That is
totally unacceptable. We should not be debating this issue or having to debate it; it should be a matter of course that employers act with compassion, kindness and respect for the tragedy that has occurred to the parents, but, sadly, it is not. That is why the Bill is so important.

Two years ago, I started the research that led to my ten-minute rule Bill, and I must admit I was gutted when we did not manage to get it through during the last Parliament. I remember that when I wrote to the Minister, who is in her place on the Front Bench, I did not expect the response I received, which was, “Come and speak to me, because I think we should have a conversation.” We had a conversation, and she and the Secretary of State could not have been more supportive or helpful. Hon. Members can imagine my pride and delight when I saw that this was a key policy in the Conservative party manifesto. That was the case not just for our party, but for the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats, so we have cross-party consensus on the issue.

I must now turn to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton, because without him we would not be here today. Yes, he came top among Conservative Members in the private Members’ Bill ballot, but I know that he will have received hundreds of emails from individuals, charities and organisations all across the country, almost beggihg him to take on their cause or campaign and their Bill. When I picked up the phone to him, however, he did not hesitate in saying yes, and I cannot thank him enough. Anybody who has gone through the experience of child loss will want to make sure that their child’s life, however short, meant something—that a difference was made because of it—and you have enabled that, so I am forever indebted to you. Thank you, Kevin.

This Bill is going to make a difference. For the families concerned, it will give them certainty. They will not have to ask that awkward question about time off when they go into work having suffered such a tragedy. It will make a difference to so many people. Before I get too emotional, I would just like to say, “Please support this Bill”.

Ms Nusrat Ghani

20 OCTOBER 2017

Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill

[Will Quince]

11 pilots were launched last Monday—but who are now putting in place additional protection for parents, which is also amazing. When my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West and I all sat down to set up the all-party group, that was our vision—to put in place good bereavement support for families across this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester has said, this is a great day that will change the lives of many parents.

The medical research is clear that, unfortunately, parents do suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. That is being looked into and it is very clear that it can be a consequence of losing a child. A statutory right to protection is therefore incredibly important. I was horrified by the examples given by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) of the lack of compassion and, indeed, common sense shown by some employers.

I thank the Minister for being willing to take the issue forward, and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton for picking it for his Bill. We know that if we deal with grief appropriately early on and allow that support to be in place, it will have long-term benefits for society and minimise the knock-on cost. My doctor—I have spoken about this before—wanted to prescribe me antidepressants, but, as I said to him, “I’m not depressed; I’ve lost a child”, which is something completely different in terms of the grief.

The action taken by this Bill, working hand in hand with the bereavement care pathway, will set a standard that I hope, as I said in the baby loss awareness debate, will be rolled out so that employers will have to take note of all bereavement and consider how they can support staff through different types of bereavement. I tell the Minister that this is an absolutely critical step. I am very proud that this Government are delivering on bereavement care for families, effectively from the moment that they suffer their loss, and putting in place the support that parents need at a time that is so incredibly and utterly devastating. It will make a huge difference to many parents.

1.28 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I have been in the position of losing my son, and I must thank my employer at the time, my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). I have to say that his support was exemplary, which was very lucky for me, because I know the absolutely devastating effect this has on the family.

The Bill has cross-party support. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who no doubt ensured that this was in her party’s manifesto, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) ensured that it was in our party’s manifesto. This is one of those issues on which we cannot quite believe that such protection has not previously been put in place.

I am really proud that it is this Conservative Government who have not only introduced a world-class bereavement care pathway, which was launched just two weeks ago and will help deliver support for parents who suffer the loss of a child—that is an amazing development and the
I am not the only Member of Parliament who will have attended a surgery quite early on in their career and had to try to support and manage a bereaved parent who might have been dealing not only with the loss of their child, but with other issues such as housing and healthcare, and who was nervous about talking to their employer. It was difficult for me to give the best possible advice in my first few cases, so I am really pleased that the Bill will help those people.

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I concur with my hon. Friend. About the understanding that Members gain from people visiting their surgeries. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for promoting the Bill.

I am lucky enough to represent a constituency with two amazing charities, Abigail’s Footsteps and Making Miracles, and our area will be part of the bereavement care pathway trial. It is a credit to my constituents and others around the country who, despite having experienced such desperate suffering, have provided the drive, working with Members here, to bring us to where we are today. I congratulate them and I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) agrees.

**Ms Ghani**: I completely agree. My hon. Friend has been a strong advocate for her constituency and a champion of her local charities. I have a big birthing centre in my constituency, the Crowborough birthing unit. The midwives do fantastic work, which I would also like to acknowledge.

I am keen to support the Bill because members of my family are involved in employment that is a little unstable and it can be tricky to take time off. One member of my family is involved in shift work: it is not easy to take time off, because it changes the pattern within the factory. I hope the Bill would provide them with support if they ever found themselves in that situation again. Another member of my family who lost a child was in the teaching profession. Taking time off was seen as not the right thing to do. I hope the Bill will bring common sense and compassion to employers, as well as support to such families.

Parents in my constituency must feel properly supported by their employer when they go through the deeply distressing ordeal of losing a child. Losing a child must cause grief beyond words. It is right that employees are able to feel comfortable taking time off to grieve without being nervous of having that conversation or nervous about losing pay. It is only right that parents with a child over six months old have the same protection in law as those who lose a child under six months old. There is no set limit on how many days may be taken off law as those who lose a child under six months old. There is no set limit on how many days may be taken off. Taking time off was seen as not the right thing to do. I hope the Bill will bring common sense and compassion to employers, as well as support to such families.

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Most employers are excellent and act with compassion and kindness, but we should not leave it to chance or to the most articulate parents who have lost a child to have that conversation. I am therefore pleased to support the Bill, and that the UK Government are leading the way in supporting parents who need time away from their work to grieve for their lost child. I am proud of my colleagues who have been able to do so much work in such a short time. The Bill will provide some support to my constituents who lose a child.

1.32 pm

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) and I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on introducing the Bill.

The death of a child is something that no parent should have to face. The intense grief they experience is something I can only imagine and I hope I never have to go through it. Sixty families across Bedfordshire lost a child in 2015-16. One would have hoped that all those families were given the space to grieve, but in some cases employers were strict and time to grieve was not granted to families. This important Bill would put on a statutory footing the right to a clear space to grieve without the worry of lost earnings. I am therefore pleased to lend my support to it, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for letting me speak at short notice.

1.33 pm

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I, too, rise to support the Bill. I pay tribute to all Members who have spoken so powerfully about their individual loss. I realise that they do so with great bravery—nothing could be more persuasive. The presence of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on the Opposition Front Bench also shows the importance of the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will be well aware from conversations we have had that my family do not tend to support Bills that originate from those on the Conservative Benches, but they will be proud that I am able to co-sponsor this Bill because my sister lost her son just a few years ago. She was fortunate in the sense that she was already on maternity leave because of the birth of my niece, but when I discussed with her whether she would have benefited from the Bill, her take was, interestingly, “I assume that I would have had that right in any event.” She worked for the NHS, but, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, that may well not be the case in organisations including the NHS.

The most powerful aspect of the Bill is that no parent would have to go through the stressful rigmarole of almost trying to negotiate, or trying to find out whether those terms apply, because the terms will be there from the start. When I managed people in a department, and had to deal with circumstances such as these, it was not entirely clear what the department’s policy was. As anyone who has been a manager in a big company with a human resources department will know, HR departments must have policies that are absolutely clear. Discretion is not often afforded, because otherwise, where would it end up? I therefore consider it essential for this right to be baked in, so that it sets a benchmark for even better standards.

I am thinking particularly about pay. We have discussed the statutory elements of pay, but, as we know, most companies will probably not go through the rigmarole of amending the pay, and I imagine that many employees in this position will end up on full pay as a result.

I do not wish to take up any further time. I am hugely supportive of the Bill and am hugely grateful to the Members who have shared their experiences and to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton on their support. I am very much that the Bill represents an advance in legislation that everyone out there, regardless of party political persuasion, will support today.
1.36 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I support the Bill and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on it. It is worth our remembering how successful he has been with private Members’ Bills. Last year, I believe, he succeeded in introducing “Claudia’s law”. I should like to think that this very special Bill is in extremely safe hands, and I note the support that it has been given so far today by Members on both sides of the House. I sincerely wish it well, and hope that it proceeds through both Houses as quickly as possible.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is not in the Chamber at the moment. I know how hard he—and other Members—has worked to raise awareness of this sensitive issue. When I think back to my first days as a Member of Parliament, I recall an Adjournment debate about baby loss that took place late one summer’s evening. I was not in the Chamber, but I read the report of the debate in Hansard, and I know that it was very emotive and very well received. Perhaps some of the work that has led to today’s debate stems from it. As has already been mentioned, there was also a ten-minute rule Bill on the subject last year.

I am pleased to note that the Government were listening, as was evident from our manifesto—and I must acknowledge that the issue was included in the Labour manifesto as well. This is also an indication that it is possible to sit on the Back Benches and, if I may borrow a phrase from my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, make a difference. Perhaps I am being presumptuous, because the Bill has not yet made it to the House, but I read the report of the debate in Hansard, and I know that it was very emotive and very well received. Perhaps some of the work that has led to today’s debate stems from it. As has already been mentioned, there was also a ten-minute rule Bill on the subject last year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) spoke of visits to the surgeries. I recall a visit to one of my first surgeries by a father who had tragically lost twins. That was a difficult case for me to deal with, as I had never come across such a situation before. There is sometimes a harsh reality check when Members of Parliament start to understand the breadth of the topics that people raise in the privacy of surgeries as they relate their personal experiences.

I followed the work of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss because of that constituent in particular. I have been pleased to hear about Baby Loss Awareness Week, debates in this place and the work of the APPG. I also welcome news of the bereavement care pathway, which I hope and sincerely believe will soon start to make a difference to some of those parents.

The other thing that today has shown is that, although we so often have heated debates in this place and are clearly divided in our opinions, there are occasions when Parliament comes together. Today’s debate must surely be an example of Parliament at its best, following on, as it does, from the earlier debate on emergency workers.

I want to close with a couple of words about the Bill. I raised the point about adoptive parents because I was genuinely uncertain whether they would be covered, so I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton could give some clarity about that.

Clearly, a lot of work has gone into getting the Bill to this stage. There will be a lot more consultation and work to ensure we get it right, so that it helps those whom we want it to help. It will go a long way to addressing a lot of the vagaries and uncertainties that exist. It is now time that we provided some clarity on those vagaries and uncertainties, which exist for the parents, but also sometimes for employers. I speak from a small business background. Often, people are so focused on running their business that when these situations arise that they have never come across—it never happened in our business—some guidelines and, now, this legislation would be a tremendous boost.

I welcome today’s debate, I welcome the Bill and I wish it every success.

1.41 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for introducing this Bill. He is a man of great integrity and when he takes on a cause, he follows it through. Those who support the Bill—all of us in this place—are grateful for that.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who, although she is not in the House today, has spoken very movingly on this issue. All those colleagues spoke movingly and with great dignity and courage in this place. In so doing, they have helped to move forward an issue of great importance.

It would be remiss of me not to highlight the hugely important work of my hon. Friend—indeed, my friend—the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). He has been hugely successful, and not only in securing the commitment in my party’s manifesto. The Opposition are united with us in their commitment on this issue, as are other parties. He has highlighted the issue tirelessly in the House and he has taken the campaign to the country and persuaded the country of its importance, and he has done so with great personal courage and dignity. We in this House and his electors in Colchester are lucky to have him.

As many hon. Members have said, the circumstances that this Bill addresses must be every person’s worst nightmare. We have heard, rightly, that many employers do a fantastic and compassionate job in such circumstances—we should pay tribute to them—but we have also heard, sadly, that there are some who do not. We heard an example this morning, I think from my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, that to my mind was inexcusable. There will be others who, probably unintentionally and through no ill intent, place a burden on people in this situation. This Bill seeks to help to build the sort of society and the sort of compassionate approach that we all wish to see. It provides time and space for bereaved parents not only to make the tragic and necessary arrangements but to grieve and to try to begin coming to terms with what has happened.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton said, the Bill provides a degree of flexibility and choice for parents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) suggested, parents can choose not to take the two weeks’ leave immediately but to split it into parts if necessary, depending on the circumstances and whether it works for them.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said, the Bill provides one less thing for parents to worry about. They will not have to go to
their employer to ask for leave, they will not have to worry about whether they might be pressed into coming back and they will not have to worry about making the case for leave. Although leave might be only a tiny thing in the circumstances, anything that reduces the stress and pressure is hugely welcome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton will correct me if I am wrong, but I welcome the fact that the schedule introduces proposed new section 80EE to the Employment Rights Act 1996, which will allow the Government to make regulations to extend the provision to include stillbirths, which is hugely important.

In response to questions raised by hon. Members in this debate, my hon. Friend rightly said that elements of the Bill could be clarified or considered further, but I hope it is not only a hugely important step in its own right but part of broader progress on the issue and on what we do to support people in such circumstances.

My hon. Friends the Members for Colchester and for Eddisbury have made the case for building on the work to introduce bereavement rooms, dedicated space and facilities in hospitals and elsewhere. The Government have already invested £35 million, and there is more to do. I hope the Bill will help to stimulate those further improvements.

The Bill strikes the right balance between employers and employees. It reflects the compassion and the sort of society that all of us in this Chamber and in this country, regardless of the political disagreements we may have, would wish to see. The Bill’s time has come, and I am proud to support it wholeheartedly, as I am sure are all other hon. Members.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I did not plan to speak in this debate. I planned to come along and show my support for the Bill by sitting on the Front Bench, but the powerful debate has compelled me to add my voice and to pay tribute to everyone who has worked so hard to get the Bill to this stage. I will not detain the House too long other than to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for choosing this subject for his private Member’s Bill.

I have had a couple of opportunities to introduce a private Member’s Bill. One I was successful in enacting, and the other was sadly talked out by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who thankfully is not here today. That is probably why we have so much consensus and success today.

It is great that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton chose this subject. There are always thousands of possible choices, but there could have been no better one. I offer him huge congratulations and thanks from all of us who have campaigned on this issue, not least the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who I am sure is off doing something important—he is probably doing some media. He should rightly get the plaudits for first introducing this subject in a ten-minute rule Bill.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) raised the issues of bereavement and baby loss in an Adjournment debate, and when she approached Members on both sides of the House, including the hon. Members for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Colchester, for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and me, about setting up an all-party parliamentary group, I did not hesitate. Indeed, I had some guilt because I had been here for 10 years and had felt the importance of all these issues but had never felt brave enough to do what she and other colleagues, who were brand new to the House, were able to do with such vigour and immediacy.

So, I continually take my hat off to her and those other Members for everything they have done to show leadership on this and take it forward. The great success in the short two years that that all-party group has been going is astonishing, with the bereavement care pathways, the bereavement suites and now this Bill on bereavement leave and pay. I am so thrilled and proud to be a small part of that group and to support it as much as I can.

I just want to give a small example from my journey when this happened to me, as sitting here has brought it all back and brought tears to my eyes. It was a very different time then, 19 years ago, and I was working part-time. I was not on a zero-hours contract, but I did not get pay for being off sick. My employer was good and gave me time off, but it was without pay. Of course I got time off for the funeral, but without pay. I was off for about two weeks but it was never paid. I had to take holiday to grieve and have the funeral, but, equally, I was not paid. My husband had a good employer and could have taken time off with pay but, like the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) was saying about people dealing with grief in different ways, he could not wait to get back to work. That caused problems and I still have not quite forgiven him for that, because I really needed him then. However, he chose to go back to work, needing to do so as his way of coping. So it is right that this is not forced upon people, but he would have chosen to have taken that time later if the option had been available.

I want to end my comments by commending the Bill to the House. I hope it has a swift passage through; it would be amazing if we could get it on the statute book by Easter—that would be fantastic. Again, I thank all the hon. Members who have brought it here. Of course it stands in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton.

Mrs Hodgson: I am delighted she was able to come off the Front Bench and give the speech she just made. It is a pleasure and privilege to have listened to everything she had to say.

I am delighted to give my strong support to the Bill today. I pay huge tribute to the Members who have brought it here. Of course it stands in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who chose to bring it here and introduced it with such eloquence and passion, but, as many others have said, other Members have worked very hard on this issue for a number of years. My hon. Friend the Members for Colchester (Will Quince), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) have shown enormous courage and compassion in bringing difficult personal experiences here to Parliament to ensure that the law is never paid. I did not have a way that will help them. Their conduct on this issue shows Parliament at its best; it shows Parliament demonstrating compassion, and people coming here
with real experience and using it to improve the lives of our fellow citizens. I congratulate and pay huge tribute to all of those Members who have brought us to where we stand today.

Other Members have spoken eloquently about the Bill’s merits. In a way, it is sad that it is even necessary, because if all employers behaved with compassion and sensitivity, it would not be. But we have heard examples where employers, either deliberately or just through carelessness, have not behaved as they should towards bereaved parents. Making sure that it is compulsory that they do behave decently is exactly the right thing to do.

Some Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, have drawn attention to the pay component. It is not enough simply to give people time off work and to make that automatic; it is important that people get some pay for that, too. That is particularly the case in order to help people on lower incomes, for whom a loss of pay even for a couple of weeks is a really serious matter. I am therefore delighted that the Bill encompasses not only time off, but pay.

I should like to raise an issue, and I hope that the Minister will respond to it. It is closely linked to the issues in the Bill, and it might be something that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton and the Government could consider in Committee if it were in order to do so. If not, perhaps the Government could consider it more generally. It relates to children who are born incredibly prematurely. My twins were born at 25 weeks and one day. For many parents whose children are born so prematurely, there is not a happy ending. I saw many parents in the University College hospital neonatal unit who had been bereaved following the birth of their children at that level of prematurity. Thanks to the miracles of modern science, however, some children do survive, and thankfully my twins were among them.

A Croydon resident, Catriona Ogilvy, has articulated a good case for giving the parents of extremely premature babies extended maternity leave. The case that Catriona makes is that when the baby comes out of the neonatal intensive care unit, they will often be like any other baby, but while they are in the unit, the parents often have to be present almost 24 hours a day. There is a case for offering parents extended statutory maternity leave with pay when the baby is born before 30 or perhaps 34 weeks’ gestation. I realise that this might be outside the scope of the Bill, given its short and long titles. If it is within the scope of the Bill, I would certainly urge my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton to consider tabling amendments that speak to this point. If it is not, I would be interested to hear what the Minister thinks about Catriona Ogilvy’s suggestion. I believe it would be an improvement to our legislation if we could consider moves in that area.

I put on record once again my congratulations to the Members involved in bringing in the Bill. I strongly commend it to the House and hope that it will progress rapidly through the various stages of parliamentary approval and get on to the nation’s statute book as expeditiously as possible.

1.57 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): On 13 March 1942, in New End hospital, the older brother that I never knew, James John Dromey, died at three days old. I do not know whether my mother had difficulty, as a trainee nurse, in getting support from her employer. What I do know is that the trauma of losing that three-day-old baby stayed with her for the rest of her life. For years she was reluctant to talk about it, and the scars and the pain never went away. That is why, for me, the Bill is so important.

The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is to be congratulated on championing a noble cause. I would also like to pay tribute to the parliamentary pioneer of the legislation that I am confident we will pass through this House: the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the hon. Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) on the work they have done, born out of bitter experience, to ensure that, in future, grieving parents get the support that they deserve.

Like the hon. Member for Banbury, I am a patron of the Bliss charity, which does wonderful work in neonatal intensive care units. I will never forget going to see the one-to-one nursing of babies hanging on to their lives and fighting desperate battles to recover. I remember an instance when Mandy McKeen, a constituent of mine, told a meeting of parents what it had been like for her. She told them that her son Liam had died seven times but that he had eventually recovered. She described the joy when that happened. I pay tribute to the courage of the hon. Member for Banbury for telling her story at a Bliss reception—she was in tears, and so was I.

The Bill is a very welcome initiative. It offers two weeks’ paid leave to any employed parent who loses a child under 18. That is right. It is right that every employee will be eligible for this right, irrespective of their length of service. It is right that in addition employed parents with at least 26 weeks’ continuous service will be eligible for statutory parental bereavement leave, and it is right that we move beyond the ACAS code of practice to enact legal rights. The code of practice is admirable and most employers follow it—most employers are good employers—but too many are oblivious to the pain being suffered by grieving parents. I remember, many years ago when I was a district officer with the Transport and General Workers Union, sitting down with a young woman in the EMI factory in Hayes, west London, as she poured out her heart about how difficult it had been losing her baby and how bitter she was that her employer had not shown one ounce of sympathy or solidarity. So, yes, most employers are good employers and do the right thing, but many do not, which is why we need a change in the law.

The CBI, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the TUC and all the major organisations in the world of work support the Bill. I am proud that the Bill, in creating a legal entitlement for parents, will go significantly further than equivalent legislation in many countries, including in western Europe, and so the Labour party strongly supports it. It is a positive step forward in supporting parents who lose a child. I stress again, as hon. Members here know, that losing a child is the most traumatic and tragic experience.
There will, of course, be issues to tease out in Committee. Points have already been made about employees with irregular contracts—agency workers, zero-hours contracts—and about whether parents in receipt of benefits should be entitled to no claim conditionality for the same period as bereavement leave to ensure that they continue to receive their full income during this time. Crucially, of course, all workers should have the same rights to pay and leave in the case of a child’s death, irrespective of the nature of their contract of employment.

There is much good will on these issues across the House. We have an opportunity to construct a Bill that will send an unambiguous message to the country that we are on the side of grieving parents. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) is right that this is a good example of Parliament coming together in a noble cause. We will work to ensure that the Bill passes through all its parliamentary stages as quickly as possible and to put in place legislation that recognises that to lose a child is an appalling tragedy, but that then to suffer from a lack of sympathy and support adds trauma to tragedy. No parent should be denied the time to grieve and make the basic necessary arrangements. No parent should have to worry about whether they can pay the bills if they take time off. That should never happen again.

The hon. Member for Colchester was right to say that we have heard the voice of the grieving, and I pay particular tribute to the champions here who have suffered the trauma themselves. We are on their side, and Parliament is determined to make a difference.

2.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who spoke so eloquently in sharing his family’s own story. That shows what a timeless and terrible problem we are discussing. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing a high place in the private Member’s Bill ballot and thank him for choosing to introduce such an important Bill.

At the recent Westminster Hall debate on bereavement leave after the loss of a child, which was led by my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), I was pleased to see that we have cross-party consensus on this issue, as has been borne out this afternoon. I am pleased to see that Parliament is coming together in a noble cause. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing a high place in the private Member’s Bill ballot and thank him for choosing to introduce such an important Bill.

As many as one in 10 of the workforce are bereaved in any year. Although the Bill addresses only those who lose a child who is below the age of 18, that is an important place for us to focus our efforts. I completely understand that it is deeply distressing for a parent to lose a child at any age, and we will continue to work with ACAS and Cruse to identify the best way to encourage employers to act sympathetically to requests for leave following the loss of an older child who has reached adulthood.

The loss is particularly harrowing, though, when a child has barely had a chance to start their life. All the hopes, anxieties and dreams invested in that baby, toddler, young child or teenager: gone in such a desperately final way. I extend my heartfelt sympathy to all parents who have suffered and, of course, continue to suffer from such a terrible loss. Like other Members, I commend those who have spoken in the House about their own loss of a child. Their bravery in so doing has raised awareness of this issue and enabled my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton to introduce this Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) made such a passionate speech. The ten-minute rule Bill that he so bravely introduced in the previous Parliament led to the inclusion of a commitment in our manifesto to ensure that all families who lose a baby are given the support that they need, including through a new entitlement to child bereavement leave. There is currently a clear imbalance between the experience of those who work for a good employer and are given the time and space needed to deal with the loss of a child, and the experience of those who, as we have heard in many examples, are not afforded such consideration.

The House also heard in the Baby Loss Awareness Week debate last week, to which I also responded, of horrendous experiences and some employers’ cold and callous treatment of their employees following the death of a child. The Bill will go some way towards addressing this issue, which is why the Government support it.

I shall try to address some of the specific points that were made in the debate. The hon. Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee) asked about those on zero-hours contracts and those whose status is that of a worker rather than an employee. I very much sympathise with the point she made. It is helpful that the Bill mirrors existing employment provisions, thereby minimising any additional complexity for employers and parents. Nevertheless, I accept that the hours of some workers—in fact, many—are really under the control of their employer in many ways, even if the hours are flexible and the workers can take time off. Of course, they do not have an entitlement to pay during that period. We heard from the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) about her personal experience of having to take off the time that she desperately needed without pay. I assure the House that, in line with the recommendations made by Matthew Taylor, we will consider this and other matters raised in the debate when we respond to the Taylor review before the end of the year.

The hon. Member for Lincoln and the shadow Minister mentioned people on benefits and universal credit claimants, who are actually not sanctioned for taking time off work after a bereavement. I am pleased to say that there is already flexibility in the conditionality to safeguard claimants in that position. If a claimant’s child has died, the work search and availability requirements are not applied for up to six months from the date of the death.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) spoke about babies who are born prematurely. He mentioned Catriona Ogilvy, who I had the privilege of meeting with my hon. Friend’s constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), as a result of the latter’s ten-minute rule Bill in the last Parliament. As a result of that meeting and his Bill, we have worked with ACAS on new and detailed guidance for employers to use when employees have a premature baby. The guidance was published last month, and I trust that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South will join efforts in raising awareness of it.
A wider culture change is needed in the way in which some businesses deal with staff who have suffered a bereavement. Of course, we are only here this afternoon because that is very much the case. There are some other issues that the Bill will not address, but things are happening so I want to mention a few of those points.

Antoinette Sandbach: One of the key aspects of the Bill is that a mother or, indeed, a father who was on maternity or paternity leave when they were bereaved is entitled to carry on having that right. That is being enshrined in the legislation. What steps will be taken to ensure that employers are aware of this impending legislation so that they can adequately prepare or, at least, try to amend their policies even before the legislation comes into effect?

Margot James: We will inform employers through the various advisory services, via Gov.uk and via other means. We will also work with ACAS to ensure that the maximum number of employers are made aware of the legislation. The efforts of all in this House to amplify the message would be extremely welcome.

More needs to happen in various areas in the handling of bereavement as a whole. We would like more employers to familiarise themselves with the ACAS guidance, “Managing bereavement in the workplace—a good practice guide”, which was developed in conjunction with the charity, Cruse Bereavement Care. This has been created specifically to support employers in managing staff who have suffered a bereavement.

The fact is that, as well as needing to take time off work, employees may also find that their performance is affected when they return, or they may be temporarily unable to perform their role. I think that that is highly likely, and other hon. Members have already stated that it is impossible in some cases of bereavement—particularly when the loss is of a child—for someone to concentrate as they would normally. I am the first to accept that this experience could exceed the two-week period that we are here to discuss. We are bringing a new entitlement into law, but I do not wish to discourage employers from understanding that all cases are different and that, of course, some people will need greater periods of flexibility in how they approach their work following a bereavement.

The guidance sets out the benefits of effective engagement at such a time and the positive effect that it can have on the employee and the business in the long run. The employee feels supported, less pressured and therefore better able to deal with the issue they face, and that helps them with the overall process of grieving.

Alongside that, employees need to understand better what other support may be available to them should they suffer the terrible loss of a child. Concerns have been raised in the House in recent months that the cost of child funerals can be an additional concern. As such, where people meet eligibility conditions, a contribution towards the cost of a simple, respectful funeral may be available through the social fund funeral expenses payment scheme. In addition, it is open to local authorities to waive burial and cremation fees for children, as some already do.

Parents who lose a child at the point of birth also need quality care and support. They are the unit that somehow has to carry on functioning after such a devastating outcome. I am a former employer myself, and although it is many years since I was responsible for a lot of people in the workplace, I am pleased to say that I had a management team who tried their best to empathise with parents who had stillborn children or who lost their child, as the mother of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington did all those years ago, at just a few days old—indeed, the majority of parents who suffer the loss of a child under the age of 18 do so in the first six months of their child’s life.

Losing a child is a truly terrible time, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton is introducing a Bill to dramatically improve the situation for anyone unfortunate enough to be in the employ of a firm totally lacking in empathy. Such parents do need the protection we are here to debate this afternoon, but we know, as I said earlier—this was certainly true in my firm, and it is true in the vast majority of firms I am aware of—that having a period of time to cover the immediate bereavement and the tragic, heart-rending funeral service is the basics, and managers have to continue to empathise with the individual after they return to work. As one of my hon. Friends pointed out during the debate, people obviously do not come back to work able to switch back on again. They will need time off for certain things. The registration of the death and all that sort of thing carries on. From my personal experience of bereavement—fortunately, it did not involve the death of a child, but being responsible for estates—I know that these things just take time. People want to take time over them; they do not want to feel in a rush and up against a deadline.

Of course I understand the needs of employers, and my company was fortunate enough to have people who could cover for absence and that sort of thing. It is different for a very small employer, and I do sympathise—it can be very difficult. It is also difficult for the self-employed. We have not heard much mention of the self-employed, who are not covered by this legislation, on the basis that they can take time off because they are their own boss. On the other hand, if they are providing services, there are other pressures on them. They have the difficulty of having to deal with customers and so forth without the back-up of a team underneath them who can take up the reins. When we come to consider issues regarding the self-employed in our response to the Taylor review, I trust that we will be able to cover some of these aspects for people who are currently not of employed status.

Mrs Hodgson: The Minister made a very good point about the time needed for people to go on the bereavement journey. Will someone who feels able to come back to work sooner but then finds that the grief hits later on—as it does; it hits different people at different stages—be able to take some of the two weeks’ paid leave later, perhaps within a six-month period? Will the Bill accommodate that?

Margot James: That is definitely the sort of thing that can be raised in Committee. At the moment, the period is two weeks. The hon. Member for Lincoln asked whether it could be divided into days here and there. That is currently not possible within the various types of family leave and carer leave that exist on the
statute book. The leave is divided into weeks, but it can be taken over a period of time. I am sure that when hon. Members get to discuss the Bill in Committee, the fixed period of time might be a subject of debate.

Thanks in large part to the work of the all-party group, the Government have recognised that the NHS needs to improve its own environments. That has led to better bereavement rooms and quiet spaces, now at nearly 40 hospitals. The Department of Health has funded Sands to deliver a national bereavement care pathway to reduce the variation in the quality of bereavement care provided by the NHS. Only last week, 11 pilot sites were announced in hospital trusts that are going to implement the new pathway.

From time to time, I receive letters from parents who have suffered the loss of a baby in my local hospital. I know that efforts have been made to improve the services for those parents. If the parents have lost their baby very, very shortly after childbirth, I can think of no worse place to be than the average maternity suite. My heart goes out to those parents. I am glad that the work of the all-party group is leading to improvements in the care in our local hospital trusts.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton for choosing this subject from among so many interests competing for our time. I very much welcome the consensus among hon. Members across the House and thank them all for their hugely valuable and sensitive contributions.

2.23 pm

Kevin Hollinrake: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to conclude the debate. Please tell me if I am likely to run out of time, as that is the last thing I want to do.

I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their very fine closing speeches. I also thank Members across the House for their consensus view that we need to provide more support for grieving parents. I can think of no more important issue that we might ever deal with in this Chamber. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for the work that she has done on this, and for her very good point about how we need to keep this leave flexible because people will need to take it at different times.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) spoke about managing grief. I have no idea how one would manage grief in this circumstance, but that is clearly something she is able to do. There is no way in the world that any of us can imagine what she has been through.

The taxpayer is picking up the cost of this, but I cannot imagine that any taxpayer would ever have a problem with doing that in this case. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who talked about employers. The Bill is a signal to employers about the minimum that they should offer. They should really offer more time off, at full pay, and they should carry the cost of that because of the good will that it will generate and the sensitivity required in such situations. It is absolutely key for any employer to offer such support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) spoke of the difference we hope to make when we come into this Chamber. I was struck by the fact that parents in my constituency who have suffered such tragedies have gone out to make a difference. I have mentioned Annika and James Dowson, who raised money for a bereavement suite at Scarborough hospital. Luke and Ruthie Heron suffered a loss at the crucial stage when a miscarriage becomes a stillbirth, and they want that to be changed to ensure that a child is formally recognised as such. Making a difference after a loss—directing their energies into something more positive—is a tremendous thing for people to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) mentioned that I was able to take forward Claudia’s law when we debated the previous Bill on this subject. Perhaps we should call this “Will’s Bill”; I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).
Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill

Second Reading

2.25 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before going into the detail of the Bill, I should like to say that I very much appreciate the cross-party support that exists for the principle behind it. In fact, I have Conservative, Labour, Scottish National party and Democratic Unionist party support. Geographically, I have sponsors from all the nations of our United Kingdom, so there are MPs in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who support the Bill. I am particularly grateful to the Minister of State for Health for coming to listen to the debate, and I appreciate the Department’s help with the progress that we have made so far.

The Bill is designed to improve the handling of health and social care data. My sponsors are my hon. Friends. The Members for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), and the hon. Members for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) would have been a sponsor, if numbers had permitted.

It would be wrong of me to move on without thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds, who is determined that the health and social care national data guardian should be put on a statutory footing and who has ensured that the Bill has reached this stage. I thank her for her advice, encouragement and knowledge in helping to prepare the Bill. I also want to thank her for, on occasion, nagging me to get on with the administrative detail that lies behind every private Member’s Bill. Let me warn any of you who think of opposing this Bill. Let me warn anyone who thinks of opposing this Bill. Let me warn anyone who thinks of opposing this Bill. Let me warn anyone who thinks of opposing this Bill. Let me warn anyone who thinks of opposing this Bill. Let me warn anyone who thinks of opposing this Bill. Let me warn anyone who thinks of opposing this Bill.

I thank Nicola Perrin, head of understanding patient data at the Wellcome Trust. Her detailed advice and extensive knowledge have been a great help in preparation for today. I thank parliamentary counsel for drafting the Bill and for being very patient with me with the revision of one clause in particular.

In all fairness, we have looked at even the tiniest of concerns regarding this Bill, and I think we have satisfied everyone who has expressed an opinion. This is a Second Reading debate about the principle of having a national data guardian for health and social care. I do not claim that the Bill is perfect—it could perhaps be improved—so I urge any right hon. and hon. Members who want to improve it or have concerns about it to join me in Committee, if the Bill makes progress, so that it can be amended and improved.

Let me, Madam Deputy Speaker, give you a very brief outline of the Bill.

2.30 pm

The Deputy Speaker interrupted the business (Standing Order No. 11 (2)).

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 1 December.

First World War Servicemen: Memorial Plaques

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

2.30 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): A number of years ago, before I was a Member of Parliament, I went to a local car boot sale and looking through all the bric-a-brac and things from days gone by, I came across a bronze plaque. It looked for all the world like a huge old Victorian penny. It had Britannia on the front, being shadowed by a lion, there were two dolphins and, at the bottom, a smaller lion was ripping apart an eagle. The lion with Britannia was the lion of courage, and the other lion was ripping apart the German eagle, while the dolphins signified the dominance of the seas enjoyed by the UK at the time. There was writing around the edge because the plaque was intended to commemorate the life of a fallen soldier. Such a plaque was known—rather crudely, given that it was to commemorate the life of one of our fallen soldiers—as a dead man’s penny. The service people were from the fledging Air Force of the time, from the Navy or those who had fallen on the battlefields.

I remember looking at the plaque—I did not know what it was; I researched it later—and wondering what had happened to the family of the fallen soldier, why the plaque had ended up there, what was the story behind the plaque and what was the story of the soldier’s life and the family he left behind. It struck me that, more often than not, such plaques reach the market—militaria shops, auction sites—because the family have died. I emphasise strongly from the outset that militaria shops do us a great service by helping to keep alive the spirit of historical campaigns and conflicts that we only read about in the history books.

I found out later that 1,355,000 of these plaques were given out. They were struck from 450 tons of bronze. They arrived in a box, sometimes with the medals of the soldier, airman or seaman, and every one of them had a certificate signed by King George V. They were given predominantly after the war, although some were given before its end, to the families of the fallen.

What does this mean in our day and age, 100 years on? We have had other wars, but world war one was the only occasion on which these plaques were struck in honour of the fallen. Each plaque was individually struck, not engraved, with the name of a serviceman, but no mention of their rank. It was struck simply to commemorate the serviceman or woman who gave their life doing their duty in the service of their country. In fact, 1,500 were given to women service personnel. They arrived in a box, sometimes with the medals of the soldier, airman or seaman, and every one of them had a certificate signed by King George V. They were given predominantly after the war, although some were given before its end, to the families of the fallen.

The Members for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for Tavet (Rebecca Pow), for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), and the hon. Members for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) would have been a sponsor, if numbers had permitted.

In all fairness, we have looked at even the tiniest of concerns regarding this Bill, and I think we have satisfied everyone who has expressed an opinion. This is a Second Reading debate about the principle of having a national data guardian for health and social care. I do not claim that the Bill is perfect—it could perhaps be improved—so I urge any right hon. and hon. Members who want to improve it or have concerns about it to join me in Committee, if the Bill makes progress, so that it can be amended and improved.

Let me, Madam Deputy Speaker, give you a very brief outline of the Bill.

2.30 pm

The Deputy Speaker interrupted the business (Standing Order No. 11 (2)).

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 1 December.
quite large and weighty. The gentleman named on it is Charles Edward Woodward. The hole in the plaque makes me a little emotional, because it means that it would have been hung on the wall, over the mantelpiece in his parent’s home. It is all they had left of him. I bought this plaque from a militaria shop not far from here, and the staff were very helpful and honourable in the exchange. With it came this man’s history. It says that it is a great war memorial plaque issued in memory of Charles Edward Woodward, who served as Private No. 1,200 of the 1/5th Battalion the Lincolnshire Regiment, Territorial Force, and was killed in action at Ypres on 30 September 1915. Having no known grave, he is commemorated by name on the Ypres Menin Gate memorial. He was aged only 20. He was younger than my son.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): My hon. Friend has mentioned the Lincolnshire Regiment and I suspect that he is about to explain the special part that this brave young man from my constituency played.

David Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for that timely intervention, because I was welling up. He was 20 at the time of his death and was the son of Parker and Mary Jane Woodward of Rose Cottage, Halton Fenside, Spilsby, Lincolnshire. This plaque is all that is left of him—he was a person.

I want to raise awareness. One day I hope that we will be able to follow Lord Ashcroft’s commendable example by collecting the plaques for these fallen people and displaying them in a room—although it will be difficult to find one big enough to house more than 1.3 million of them—in order to commemorate those who died preserving the integrity of democracy and the freedom of our country.

Sadly, over the years, some of these plaques have been scrapped, because nobody knows what they are, although I do not think that many of them are finding their way to scrapyards. The previous Member for Croydon South promoted a private Member’s Bill that resulted in legislation preventing war memorials from being attacked and melted down, and I would like these plaques to be covered by its provisions, because they mean something.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very moving and passionate speech. He speaks of the Members we lost in this place in the great war. We see their shields in the Chamber every day. I would like to share a very positive initiative in one of the villages in my constituency, Crawley Down. A group of volunteers, led by Roger Webb and Philip Coote, is putting up memorial plaques on each of the homes of the servicemen who died in that awful conflict 100 years ago. It is wonderful to see that happening and I am hugely honoured to have been present when students from Crawley Down School have unveiled those memorials, keeping alive the memory of that generation of which my hon. Friend is speaking so eloquently.

David Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for that nice story. It is right that we should commemorate. This is only part of the story, but it is fitting for those homes to bear those plaques.

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) for securing this debate, and I commend to the House of Commons a plaque to be displayed here in the House of Commons. I would therefore like to round off this emotive speech by letting him go home and handing the plaque to my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins).

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) for securing this debate, and I commend him for his eloquence, emotion and seriousness of purpose.

It is interesting to hear of the number of memorial plaques and scrolls that were issued to the families of the fallen, reminding us of the huge losses suffered by Britain and the then empire. As we have heard, the plaques were issued by the Government to the next of kin of those who died serving with the British and empire forces in the first world war, along with a commemorative scroll and a message from the king. While most were issued in the years immediately after the war, the fact that they were issued until the 1930s reminds us that the loss of life from the first world war continued after the guns fell silent on 11 November 1918. The fact that over 600 were issued to the families of women is a stark reminder of the important role that women played during the war. Once issued, the awards became the property of the families to do with as they saw, and see, most fitting. Many are still treasured by descendants, but, as my hon. Friend points out, in some cases they were donated or used in local memorials, and many local museums have them in their collections.

As I am sure my hon. Friend will understand, it is not practical or possible for our national museums to accept every item offered to them. This is especially apparent, given the tragically large scale of distribution of the plaques. When I visit museums, which I have done numerous times in my first four months as a Minister, it is amazing to see the number of items kept in storage. As with all museums, the Imperial War Museum has strict criteria for accepting items. These are determined by its acquisitions and disposal policy, which is available on the Imperial War Museum website. Decisions have to be made on what is of most value in the context of its collections, and in telling the stories of the causes, course and consequences of the first world war. I am sure the hon. Members will agree that it is not for Government to decide what should be done with items that are in the private ownership of families or collections.

Victoria Atkins: Will you allow me a moment, Madam Speaker, to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale for making such a moving speech, and also for presenting me with a valuable and special token of the, sadly, very short life of someone who would have lived in Spilsby, in my constituency?

The Minister is talking about museums. We have a wonderful museum in Alford, just as few miles down the road from Spilsby, where that young man came from.
It is run by volunteers, and currently has an exhibition commemorating the centenary of the first world war. The collection has been gathered from local people who have lent objects that have been found in their attics, or in their grandparents' homes, to the museum at Alford Manor House. It will be my very great honour to lend this plaque to the museum until next year—with, obviously, the consent of my hon. Friend.

David Morris indicated assent.

John Glen: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. She has made the case for the importance of local museums all over the country, and the enormous impact that they can have as communities seek to do the right thing by those who came before them and remember appropriately the sacrifices that were made.

It is very difficult to categorise the appeal of the plaques to their owners 100 years on from the war. Indeed, the Passchendaele centenary has shown us how varied are the connections that people feel to the fallen of the first world war, not only through direct family relationships but through associations based in their local communities, or connections through a school, regimental club or society. While it is not appropriate for the Government to consider collecting plaques that are no longer in the hands of the families of those who lost their lives during the war, a number of other options are open to those who possess a plaque or wish to find out more about how to commemorate an individual.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, local, regimental or corps museums associated with the place where the person commemorated lived, or was born, may have an interest in the plaques, or, indeed, in any other items relating to the first world war and its aftermath. They may also have further information about that person and his or her experience of the war. Local museums may be seen to have a stronger claim to the acquisition of such items, and are often well placed to exhibit them in their local context. That, I think, brings more meaning to the community that the individual came from.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Families now remember their fallen by dedicating a corner of their living room to the young man, or young woman, who is lost. They have the helmet, the hat, the belt and the medal. The medal usually has the young person's name on it, written around the ring. The families generally have the letter of condolence as well. Families whom I have visited, because the people whom they have lost were under my command when they were killed, have had one of these pennies in their local context. That, I think, brings more meaning to the community that the individual came from.

John Glen: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for what he has said. Whenever I think of him, I think of his service and the sacrifices made by him and by those alongside him. Once again, he has made a very important point.

There are also two invaluable online resources that help to commemorate those who fell. They provide more information about the person commemorated, and give those in possession of a plaque the option to make their information publicly available. The Imperial War Museum's Lives of the First World War project is a permanent digital memorial which records the stories of individuals from across Britain and the Commonwealth who served in uniform and worked on the home front. The website currently has more than 7.5 million individual life stories and more than 120,000 registered members. The site offers the opportunity to add details of medals and service to an individual's record, as well as photographs of items, thereby creating a permanent digital memorial of their first world war story.

A notable example is Isaac Rosenberg, the artist and poet. His online life story on the site includes pictures of Isaac and his gravestone, as well as an image of the next-of-kin memorial plaque received by his family. He served as a private in the 1st Battalion, King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment, where his experiences inspired some of his finest work. He was killed during the German spring offensive near Arras on 1 April 1918, but is remembered to this day.

The Royal British Legion also has its Every One Remembered database, which aims to ensure that by next year every man and woman from across the Commonwealth who fell during the first world war is remembered individually by those living today. This shows us that, while the way that people commemorate may have changed thanks to technology, the desire to remember the fallen is undiminished.

In the aftermath of the war, in addition to the memorial plaques, the fallen were recorded on many memorials up and down the country, and indeed across the world. As part of the Government's centenary programme, there are many ways that communities can find out more about these memorials. I invite all hon. Members to encourage their constituents to explore the funding and training available and to get involved in recording and preserving them.

The war memorial portal project has seen the Imperial War Museum, Heritage England and other partners develop a new portal called ukwarmemorials.org, which hosts information on all UK war memorials and signposts routes for advice and funding. The portal has the most up-to-date advice on conserving and repairing memorials, and will continue to grow over the coming year. The site also contains information about other work that Historic England, the Imperial War Museum, the War Memorials Trust and Civic Voice are undertaking as part of the centenary programme to record and conserve memorials.

To date, Historic England has added 1,860 memorials to the heritage list for England and expects to have listed 2,500 by the end of the centenary. Supporting this, Civic Voice has run over 180 workshops to train communities to survey and record the status of local memorials. I suggest that hon. Members recommend the site to any constituents with an interest in local memorials.

The War Memorials Trust, which provides a programme of grants to help to repair and conserve memorials, has to date made over 360 repair grants across the country, totalling some £1.4 million. It is also worth recognising the work of the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Victoria Cross commemorative paving stones project, which my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale alluded to. This project aims to commemorate each of the 627 men who won the Victoria Cross during the first world war by placing a commemorative stone in the town or village of their
birth or, in the case of those born overseas, at the National Memorial Arboretum. The stones will be a visible reminder of the heroic contribution made by local people, as my hon. Friend referred to so eloquently.

In a debate on memorials to the fallen of the first world war, it is also appropriate to commend the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Its Menin Gate memorial and Tyne Cot cemetery recently hosted some of the Government-led events to commemorate the centenary of Passchendaele, the third battle of Ypres. However, it should be remembered that there are nearly 300,000 war graves in the UK from the first world war and other conflicts at 13,000 locations—details of local sites can be found on the CWGC website.

As we look ahead to the significant centenaries of 2018, the Government will of course be doing all we can to draw attention to different aspects of commemoration, and to the ways in which we remember our war dead.

As part of that, we will of course do our utmost to ensure that the public are informed of the options open to them if they are in possession of memorial plaques, or indeed of any other personal items, and of how they can use them and resources such as Lives of the First World War to explore their own family and local history.

The memorial plaques and the many other memorials to the fallen of the first world war are a constant reminder of the huge sacrifice made by a whole generation 100 years ago, and I hope that through our commemoration programme, and by working with our partners on innovative ways of commemoration, we can ensure that future generations never forget those who fell.

Question put and agreed to.

2.55 pm

House adjourned.
9.30 am

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tackling aggressive antisocial behaviour.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Bailey. For seven years, the standard response of Ministers to any question or doubt about crime and antisocial behaviour has been an assurance that crime is falling. Those of us who ventured that police budgets were being cut too deep and too fast, exposing areas such as the west midlands to severe grant reductions, have been brushed aside. I have lost track of the number of Ministers who think that all is solved by the stock answer that crime is falling.

It is certainly true that the crime survey for England and Wales provides a valuable picture of long-term trends for certain types of offences, but it does not necessarily capture the picture on the ground for other types of crime, so it is wrong for Ministers to rely on those statistics to the exclusion of all else. The fear that dominates the daily lives of real people and their families is not addressed when Ministers issue such a stock reply.

Estimates are especially unreliable when it comes to particular types of offences and, as a consequence, we frequently underestimate certain crimes. Sexual offences and child sexual exploitation, about which we are beginning to learn much more, are good examples of underestimated crimes. Antisocial behaviour almost certainly also falls into that category. Until 2015, the headline figures also excluded fraud and computer misuse. When those figures are added, the number of crimes rises from around 5.9 million to around 11 million, which suggests that there is even less room for complacency.

Not that long ago there were major debates about the need to improve the quality of police recording of crime. When recording is done properly, we have a more reliable measure to assess recent or current trends. In the last year alone, police recorded crime increased by 10%—the biggest year-on-year rise in a decade—which includes a 20% surge in knife and gun crime. That rise is actually accelerating; a 3% increase in the year to March 2015 was followed by an 8% rise in 2016.

Turning to antisocial behaviour, most people think of their home as their sanctuary, their castle, and the place where the troubles of the external world can be set aside, if only for a short time. But what if home is not like that? What if, because of aggressive antisocial behaviour, intimidation, threats and harassment, a person’s home becomes just another place of risk and fear—a place where they can be subjected to deliberate and intolerable levels of noise, and where dangerous and uncontrolled dogs are allowed to run free, threatening children? What if walking a few hundred yards to or from their own front door risks a confrontation and potential assault?

What if the immediate vicinity of their home is plagued by thugs with motorcycles, who constantly congregate outside or nearby?

According to some reports, there has been a 1% decrease in antisocial behaviour incidents. I find that impossible to believe. Try telling my constituents that antisocial behaviour is declining. As far back as 2012, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary reported concerns about the wide variation in the quality of decision making associated with the recording of antisocial behaviour by police forces. That resulted in a review, but as budgets are increasingly stretched, I find it hard to believe that there has been a vastly improved focus on tackling antisocial behaviour. We are talking about offences including vehicle and bike-related crime, vandalism, criminal damage, graffiti, nuisance neighbours and extensive intimidation, involving threats, verbal abuse and domination of whole neighbourhoods.

Not only do Ministers say that crime is falling but they regularly tell us that they have protected police funding. That is simply not the case. The reality is that the central Government grant remains largely the same, and the shortfall in police budgets has been transferred to the council tax precept. Analysis by the Library tells us that since 2010, police expenditure from tax and grants has fallen by 5% in cash terms and 13% in real terms.

The National Audit Office has pointed out the effect of that sleight of hand: the force areas most affected by funding reductions are those that are most reliant on the police grant. Four of the five forces that are most dependent on the central Government grant—all, incidentally, in the midlands and the north—are those experiencing the worst overall budget reductions. I am sure that the Government understand perfectly well that economically depressed areas with a relatively low council tax base are not capable of making up for the loss of central grant, even if they raise the council tax precept to the maximum permitted level.

In the west midlands, which is one of the hardest hit areas, we have faced cuts of £130 million since 2010—the highest proportion in the whole country. In 2017-18, we have suffered a further £6 million budget cut. The chief constable has recently been forced to point out that policing will “break” unless forces are given “real terms protection”. In Northumbria, the chief constable has said that his force is close to no longer being able to provide a professional service. The chief constable of Avon and Somerset police said:

“We now face a tipping point. We cannot sustain further funding cuts without extremely serious consequences.”

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case on behalf of his constituents and the city of Birmingham. The West Midlands police service has suffered a real-terms cut of £18 million this year. The chief constable has warned that the force is stretched to the limit. The police and crime commissioner has said that call-out times are getting longer; they are now up to 24 hours for 999 calls about domestic violence, and the police often do not turn out at all to deal with antisocial behaviour, although it is said to be very serious. Does my hon. Friend agree that the first duty of any Government is to ensure the safety and security of their citizens, and that it is
Steve McCabe: I agree totally. Those reckless cuts and the Government’s refusal to recognise the consequences are the reason why we are experiencing such problems.

As well as giving us a hopelessly complacent message about crime falling, Ministers for far too long have tried to tell us that this is all about back-office savings—that the police are top heavy in administration and there is plenty of fat. As my hon. Friend says, the figures tell a different story. The number of police officers in the country has fallen for seven consecutive years, despite all those promises to protect the frontline. Since 2010, more than 20,000 police officers and 6,000 community support officers have been axed.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the falling numbers of police officers, and especially community police officers—in my region of Yorkshire, more than 400 have been lost—has a huge impact on antisocial behaviour, such as crimes committed on off-road bikes and mopeds, which plague communities like mine in Barnsley? Does he agree that more needs to be done to tackle it?

Steve McCabe: I do agree. It seems to me that one feature of policing, particularly in relation to antisocial behaviour, must be deterrence. If people feel that they will not be caught and there will be no consequences, there is nothing to inhibit their behaviour, and that is exactly what we see in communities right across the country at the present time.

Policing has now reached a historic low, with forces at their lowest strength per 100,000 of the population since records began back in 1979. In the west midlands, as we have heard, we have 2,000 fewer officers compared with 2010 and there are 50% fewer community support officers. Conversely, better-funded forces such as Surrey, which benefit from the perverse nature of police funding decisions, have managed to increase their numbers of police officers for their low-crime communities over that same period. That says something about priorities and attitudes to crime and antisocial behaviour.

All of this is having a profound effect on police morale. The Police Federation report for 2017 shows that 58% of officers have reported not having time to do the job to the standard they would be proud of; 57% report being single-crewed, which increases operational risk, and 39% report high job stress.

I was recently told of an incident by someone who works in community safety. There was a local neighbourhood disturbance, with about 40 youths with weapons roaming the area, threatening each other and carrying out attacks. After several members of the public made repeated calls, a police car eventually turned up, sirens blaring. The youths scattered, and naturally there were no arrests. It turned out that the occupant of the police car was the duty inspector for the area, who was the only officer available. He freely confessed that he had had no choice but to turn up sirens blaring in the hope that he might scatter the youths. Is that really the level of policing we should expect in this day and age when our neighbourhoods are under attack? Force-wide voluntary resignations increased by 11% last year, and long-term absence is at record levels. Our police are stretched to breaking point.

It is hard to see how any Minister could come to the House with a straight face and continue to argue that the impact of their cuts is not affecting operational performance. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary’s police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy report for 2016 talks of the risk that forces are struggling to meet demand and are resorting to artificial means of suppressing that demand. The report suggests that that might be done by downgrading the severity category of a call or by setting a quota for the number of cases that get referred for special assistance. For example, a number of forces are increasingly dealing with calls for service over the phone rather than deploying officers to visit the victim. That can be very inappropriate in certain types of cases—for example, assault or sexually related offences—and there can be no guarantee that the person charged with conducting the phone call has the correct skills to carry out such an interview.

Particular areas of concern are the large number of incidents in control rooms that do not receive an appropriate response, as referred to earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). An immediate response should be within 15 to 20 minutes and a prompt response is usually within an hour. In either event, that is likely to be too long to prevent a crime or, in most cases, catch a perpetrator red-handed. However, in too many cases, calls are not allocated for several days. That is consistent with the many examples of which Members will be aware from their constituents, saying that they phoned the police but did not hear back or that officers attended several days later but made no attempt to take finger prints or record any other significant details that might help identify the culprit. In too many circumstances, the response to a crime is a perfunctory police appearance, well after the event—that is if they turn up at all.

Across the United Kingdom, the number of abandoned 999 calls more than doubled in the 12 months from June 2016, rising from 8,000 to nearly 16,500 across 32 forces. The number of 101 calls abandoned over the same period also rose—by 116%. In total 230,000 calls were abandoned; 101 is the number that the police prefer the public to use to report antisocial behaviour. That is the reality of much police response in this day and age.

As I have said, we have to be careful about relying on ministerial fantasies that crime is falling. Half of police forces inspected since August 2016 have been rated as “inadequate” for failing to record hundreds of thousands of crimes reported to them—approximately 219,000 crimes a year. Only three forces were rated as “good”. West Midlands police were found to have failed to record an estimated 38,800 crimes. In 2015-16, no further action was taken in 74% of recorded offences and by 2016-17 that had increased to 76%. By far the largest category of “no further action” cases resulted from a failure even to identify a suspect. It is not hard to see why crime is rising if the fear of being caught is rapidly diminishing.

Perhaps I may take this opportunity to remind the Minister of the importance of those findings and the store the Government place on HMIC inspections. The former policing Minister, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), told us that
“HMIC’s rolling programme of crime data integrity inspections will keep the spotlight on forces to improve the accuracy of their crime recording.”

That is exactly what HMIC is doing, and it is reporting an increasing number of forces unable to cope and, in many cases, opting to downgrade the reality of the crime people are experiencing.

There is little evidence of a robust Government response to those HMIC warnings. Ironically, even HMIC is seeing its budget cut, with a 14% reduction in cash terms since 2012. First the Government cut the police, and then they cut the agency charged with keeping track of police effectiveness. Is it really that surprising that there has not been an HMIC report on force handling of antisocial behaviour since 2012?

The Government have embarked on a dangerous road. It is important to remember that, as part of the incoming coalition Government’s efforts to diminish the Labour legacy, they put arguments about civil liberties ahead of issues of public safety. In everything from control orders, designed to protect us from would-be terrorists, to antisocial behaviour measures, Ministers set out to loosen existing legislation and controls. To some extent, the changes were cosmetic, but they had an impact, as can be seen from the reduction in the use of stop-and-search powers, and the corresponding increase in knife crime.

The then Home Secretary branded Labour’s antisocial behaviour measures “bureaucratic, expensive and ineffective”. She embarked on a series of changes that led to a loss of focus on bearing down on antisocial behaviour, as practitioners had to take time to learn new language and procedures for tackling existing issues for which powers were already proving quite effective. However, it was more than a rebrand. Abolishing ASBOs and introducing injunctions to prevent nuisance and annoyance was a weakening of the stance on antisocial behaviour. Breach of an ASBO was a criminal offence; breach of a civil injunction was a civil contempt, carrying a much lower maximum penalty. Significantly, under-18s can be dealt with only by the youth courts, where the penalties are lower.

Also, collapsing ASBOs and related measures into a civil injunction effectively removed the graduated response that Labour’s measures were designed to achieve. It is true that there was a fairly high breach rate for ASBOs, but acceptable behaviour contracts and antisocial behaviour injunctions were stepping stones prior to an ASBO. There were stages to be gone through, and warnings could be issued if the initial response failed to quell the unacceptable behaviour. The Government’s changes swept all that away, along with all efforts to monitor the effectiveness of the legislation.

The Home Office and the Ministry of Justice regularly respond to questions about the effectiveness of their policies with the standard defence that it would not be cost-effective to collect the information requested. Indeed, the Government have contrived to make it virtually impossible to measure the effectiveness of their response to antisocial behaviour. Not only do they fail to collect information centrally; county courts do not do it either. Consequently, the only way to obtain information on the Government’s injunction strategy would be to examine individual case files. In fact, the Government have no capacity to link arrests, recorded crime, and prosecution and conviction data. They have no idea of the effect their policies have on crime and antisocial behaviour.

Labour’s approach was not just about court orders. Family intervention projects were established to provide focused work on those families considered most likely to generate antisocial behaviour problems. In 2007, the Department for Communities and Local Government produced a report that found that both criminal and antisocial behaviour had declined markedly at the point when those families exited the programme. The risk that they would face eviction because of their behaviour had also considerably reduced. Once again, the incoming Government sought to change things, and introduced a decentralised troubled families programme, with a significantly broader focus and, of course, fewer resources. It coincided with huge cuts in local authority youth programmes and other social services spending.

Despite early positive claims about the troubled families programme, an independent evaluation found that there was no significant impact across its key objectives and that it was not possible to evaluate estimates of savings, despite Government attempts to argue that the policy had resulted in savings of £1.2 billion. That, of course, was at a time when Ministers were keen on arguing for payment by results. However, the independent evaluation noted:

“The financial framework could have been significantly improved if it had followed the model of other programmes, which included a requirement to demonstrate that results were attributable to the programme.”

It is my contention that those changes in legislation, and the loss of focus, have damaged our ability to tackle antisocial behaviour. I attended a recent meeting of a community safety panel covering my constituency. I was impressed by the commitment of those present—about 23 people, including a fire station commander, who chaired the meeting, a police inspector, two councillors, a community representative and several council officers. It was a two-and-a-half-hour meeting; they are bi-monthly. It was full of presentations, which I must say I found interesting. However, what I did not get was that CompStat feeling: where were the raw data and the demand to do better? Where, indeed, were the results, and demands for action? I fear that, without greater direction from the senior echelons of the various agencies, community safety panels will become another part of the local bureaucratic apparatus. They are well intentioned, but what issues will they resolve?

It was interesting to hear that the panel had noted an increase in gang activity in south Birmingham and was concerned about an emerging picture suggesting that children are getting involved in gangs at a much earlier age, and that membership is no longer confined to those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds but embraces those from what we might regard as quite middle-class homes. It seems to me that that information supports my view that we are losing control of our neighbourhoods, and that we need Government-directed activity and local intelligence to come together to provide clear action plans to tackle the threat posed by that emerging gang culture.

Neither the Home Secretary nor the Prime Minister made a single reference in their conference speeches to antisocial behaviour. It is clearly not on their radar. Nor did they mention police resources. It is all very well the Home Secretary saying that she plans to keep the police safe, but how safe are they if there are not enough of them to do the job and they are exposed to risk every
I advocate that we need to examine stop-and-search once more, particularly where there is evidence of a high risk of weapons being carried and increases in knife and gun crime and other violent assaults. Members will recall that the Prime Minister claimed in her 2014 conference speech that the number of black people being stopped and searched had fallen by two thirds as a result of her intervention. However, the figures show that although overall stop-and-search is down, the number of black people being stopped and searched as a percentage of the total has actually risen. It is a failed policy. Discrimination needs to be tackled, but not with red tape that ties the police in knots and puts the safety of whole communities at risk.

I do not understand why, in an age of high-quality cameras that are so small and relatively cheap, it is so difficult to mount more successful surveillance operations in areas where particular types of street crime such as theft, assault and carjacking are prevalent. When it comes to the pursuit of those on mopeds and motorcycles, why is more attention not given to drone technology, and where local communities are clearly being intimidated, why not make more use of professional witnesses to identify and prosecute prolific offenders?

We need to see a new energy in tackling aggressive antisocial behaviour, with guidance from the Home Office to chief constables, police and crime commissioners and local authority chief executives making it clear that it is a priority and must be tackled. That should be coupled with a reinvigoration of community safety panels, with a clear emphasis: their job is to collect and analyse data, so that they can demonstrate how they are getting on top of rising neighbourhood crime and aggressive antisocial behaviour. If the Government are determined to hide behind the cloak of localism, they must issue guidance on how data are collected and shared on the success and failure of measures such as criminal behaviour orders and civil injunctions. We must be able to see reliable comparisons, so that there is proper evidence about the scale of the problem and the success and failure of existing strategies and policies.

I support the development of a national transformation fund to tackle some of the worst areas of deprivation, but we should also entertain the idea that such an approach should be coupled with a new family intervention programme, so that those who create the most problems are not simply left to enjoy state benefits without any obligations on their behaviour. We need to revisit their entitlement to enjoy rented tenancies in areas where they cause untold trouble.

In circumstances where the perpetrators are homeowners or responsible for those living at their abode, we need to be bold. Where the culprit or someone regularly living or responsible for those living at their abode, we need to change the law so that eviction is the end point. Local authorities should be given new powers with the police, so that those who persistently practise aggressive antisocial behaviour, or permit its practice from their dwelling, can have their property made subject to a compulsory purchase order—effectively forcing them to leave the area and preventing them from continuing to practise the evil that they have inflicted on innocent victims for too long.

The simple truth is that the last Labour Government picked up the challenge of aggressive antisocial behaviour in our neighbourhoods and did something about it after
years of neglect. The present Prime Minister has failed us on that vital area of crime by cutting our police, ignoring the predicament of our constituents and allowing crime and antisocial behaviour to grow. It is time for a substantial change.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I wish to bring in the Front-Bench spokespersons at 10.30 am. That gives Back-Bench speakers about four to five minutes each.

10.6 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I will be considerate of your advice and the fact that there are other people who wish to speak, rather than just go on for a considerable time.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing this debate. I know he will share my pleasure that he will be able to discuss the issues that we have experienced over the past few years of neglect. The present Prime Minister has failed us on that vital area of crime by cutting our police, ignoring the predicament of our constituents and allowing crime and antisocial behaviour to grow. It is time for a substantial change.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is, as ever, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on a comprehensive analysis of the problems confronting many of our constituents.
I shall confine my remarks to the criminal, dangerous and antisocial use of motorcycles. Many Members of the House have raised concerns about that; indeed, the Prime Minister herself has acknowledged that it is a problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), on the Front Bench, has been campaigning alongside me and others on the issue.

It is a real problem in my constituency. The young people who ride the motorcycles often wear crash helmets, although they are unlicensed, or use some sort of head covering—a balaclava or scarf—to make it very difficult to recognise them. That poses challenges for the police. There is recognition on the part of Merseyside Police, to whom I am indebted for my briefing for this debate, that these scrambler bikes, as they are commonly called, although they are not necessarily scrambler bikes, are used in the pursuit of crime. We have heard examples of their being used in acid attacks and in ram-raids on shops, but more commonly in my constituency they are used to distribute drugs and, in some cases, firearms. Merseyside Police tell us that although there has been a sharp increase, in some parts of the Liverpool city region, in the discharge of firearms, the numbers of firearms have not necessarily gone up. The same firearms are being used repeatedly, and in some cases they are being ferried around by young people connected to so-called drug barons. They are almost like firearms for hire: the young people drive around, and whoever wants to hire a firearm for the day, that is how it is delivered to them.

There is real concern about this matter and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak said, at the same time as the problem is growing, police numbers have been reduced. On Merseyside, we have 1,000 fewer police officers than we had in 2010, and which creates challenges. This matter is covered by section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002, which gives the police the power to seize vehicles, including motorbikes, if they are used in a “careless and inconsiderate” manner. The Police Federation has concerns about this matter. It believes that the law needs to be clarified so that police officers in the situation described have some kind of exemption from prosecution. Obviously, their need to protect the public should override the civil libertarian concerns about people who are using what are often unlicensed and uninsured vehicles for criminal purposes.

I hope that the Minister, who nodded when I made that point, will acknowledge, when she winds up the debate, that that is a problem and it needs to be addressed urgently.

10.18 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on presenting a very comprehensive case. This issue affects us all, regardless of constituency or region of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; it is a shared concern. We are all very aware of antisocial behaviour issues, such as drunkenness, noise pollution, vandalism, shoplifting and joyriding. In the past week alone, I have read about displays of antisocial behaviour among young people during freshers week in Belfast, and on Saturday a substantial number of fireworks and counterfeit goods were seized in Newtownabbe, a town just north of Belfast. Again, those were to be used for antisocial behaviour.

A quick Google search confirms that such behaviour is not confined to Northern Ireland. In the past week, police have launched an operation in Skegness to deal with antisocial behaviour. New orders have come into force in King’s Lynn, Downham Market and Hunstanton. In the broads, a new plan to tackle antisocial behaviour has come into force, and a zero-tolerance order has been passed in Walsall. That is a very quick synopsis of some of the issues. Across Northern Ireland, the incidence of antisocial behaviour incidents has decreased, although there has been a slight increase in the last three years. The Police Service of Northern Ireland releases monthly and annual figures, and while antisocial behaviour incidents seem to be falling they are still too high. We have to address that. Antisocial behaviour rates in Northern Ireland are consistently higher in July, August and October, while they fall between November and February or March. It could be said that that suggests the weather plays a role in how people behave. Anyone who has been to Northern Ireland can attest to the fact that we do cold weather better than most, but the fact is that the figures decrease in the colder months, whereas when the weather is good and the nights are longer, people tend to stay out for longer and consume an amount of alcohol. We all know those people who consume more alcohol and become very friendly, but most people who consume alcohol to excess become louder, rowdier and are prone to getting into arguments and even physical fights.

Like many of my colleagues, I have a fantastic relationship with the local police force of Northern Ireland. They continue to work alongside relevant organisations to address antisocial behaviour, particularly when it relates to the misuse of drugs or alcohol. We
I want to start by saying very firmly that the police are trying to do a good job and want to reduce antisocial behaviour as much as my hon. Friend and other Members who have spoken do. However, the key issue boils down to policing numbers and the police’s ability to respond on a local level to concerns raised. There are many powers in place. Previous Labour Governments, the current Conservative Government, and previously the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Government, introduced a number of measures to give powers to local councils and the police to tackle antisocial behaviour, but ultimately it is about having local, visible policing on the ground, engaged with the community, being seen, giving reassurance and dealing with issues at the first instance, before they escalate into what my hon. Friend described.

I mention that because just yesterday I received an email from a constituent, which puts the case more eloquently than I ever could. The constituent wrote to me regarding policing in one of the towns in my constituency, and she said:

“Can we ever expect to see the police walking again or PCSOs? Is this ever going to happen again. Their presence is immeasurable on so many levels i.e. reassurance, deterrents, role models, help when needed… the list is endless.”

It is important that we look at that summary of a real problem.

In my area, the North Wales force is small compared with that of the West Midlands, but it covers a geographical area from the borders of Chester through to Holyhead, a distance of nearly 100 miles as the crow flies. In my area, since I was Police Minister in 2010—we had 1,590 police officers in March 2010—we have seen a reduction to 1,441. That is 149 police officers lost, nearly 10% of the police force. In Wales as a whole, we have lost 682 officers over a similar period. That is at a time, particularly in the last 18 months to two years, when we have had increased demands on the police in terms of armed response units, prevention of terrorism and radicalisation on a range of fronts, from right-wing radicalisation through to potential terrorist threats elsewhere.

The police are responding dramatically to those areas at a time when they are facing difficult cuts, and have lost thousands of staff and over 20,000 police frontline officers as a whole. If we add to that the 36% reduction in police and community support officers, who deal with the visible, frontline, intelligence gathering and reassurance issues, which my constituent referred to in her email yesterday, we find that the ability to respond to low-level aggressive antisocial behaviour is not as good as it was, despite the best efforts of the police.

My hon. Friend mentioned the partnership in relation to local councils. Local councils are facing severe cuts in their funding. Just looking this very morning at this month’s reports, we see that Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council in south Wales has said that it may have to turn off its CCTV cameras, because of a potential lack of funding. Denbighshire County Council, in the next authority to my own, has had the same problem. Councils are facing a squeeze on their resources and are having to take on statutory responsibilities more and more, making it difficult to do things that are important in helping to support the police on low-level antisocial behaviour.

There will always be pleas for more money—we know that. With the police draft grant coming up in November to December, and the police grant being
formalised by this House in February next year, the Minister has an opportunity to recognise that policing is under pressure. It is under pressure for the reasons that my hon. Friend mentioned, but also because the increasing demands of this very dangerous world that we live in are dragging police resources away from the neighbourhood policing model. The challenges of mental health, antisocial behaviour, reductions in council budgets and reductions in CCTV are causing real difficulties at local level. The Minister and her colleagues, the Police Minister and the Home Secretary, have an opportunity to look at the police budget and not to palm it off, as my hon. Friend said, to those local ratepayers, who in many areas are facing difficulties anyway and whose rateable value base was not sufficient to generate the income. The Minister should use that opportunity and look at how she can uplift police funding to help to meet the challenges that we have described today, and in doing so help to reduce antisocial behaviour, protect communities, take stress off individuals and prevent the criminals of tomorrow from gaining confidence, growing in their potential and committing more serious crimes at a later age.

10.29 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I commend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing this debate. I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), giving us a UK-wide picture. I am conscious that this matter is devolved in Scotland, but I will offer a couple of thoughts through a Scottish prism, as well as from a constituency point of view.

The backdrop to this debate is police cuts in England; when I saw it on the Order Paper, I thought it an excellent opportunity to talk about some of the things that we are doing north of the border, particularly on policing. The Scottish Government went into the 2007 elections with the commitment to put 1,000 extra police officers on Scotland’s streets. I am glad that 10 years on, we have managed to maintain that; the number of police officers on Scotland’s streets. I am glad that 10 years on, we have managed to maintain that; the number of police officers has gone from about 16,000 to 17,249 in June. As a result of ensuring that there are police officers on the streets, we now have the lowest levels of recorded crime since 1974, which was 42 years ago. That is welcome, but it is important that we do not rest on our laurels. Although there has been a reduction in the number of many crimes, I am disappointed to say that there has been an increase in the number of sex-related crimes, as there has across the board.

From my casework in surgeries and from going out door-knocking, I know that antisocial behaviour involves many issues. I will refer particularly to some antisocial behaviour issues in the Cranhill area, where I come from originally. Antisocial behaviour there comes from a group of young boys who think that it is absolutely acceptable to throw stones at both windows and people. I was disappointed to see a couple of weeks ago that a young girl in my constituency was injured when they threw a brick at a passing car. That is totally unacceptable, and we need to nip it in the bud straight away. There are also antisocial behaviour issues in the Bellshill and Garrowhill areas in my constituency, and I am working hard with Police Scotland and Community Safety Glasgow to address them. I pay tribute to Community Safety Glasgow, a joint initiative of Glasgow City Council and Police Scotland, led by Eileen Marshall, to tackle antisocial behaviour and crime. Since it was set up in 2006, there has been a remarkable transformation in our communities.

I also want to mention some of the local voluntary groups working to provide diversionary activities for young people. The first is Urban Fox, led by Michael McCourt and Debbie McGowan. It is a voluntary project based in Lilybank in my constituency that delivers a range of educational and diversionary activities including supervised sport, leisure programmes and health and social guidance. It promotes self-development and provides young people with skills, confidence and opportunities to develop self-esteem. I commend the work of Urban Fox to the House.

Andy Gilbert is a passionate community activist in my constituency who does a lot of work in the Glenburn Centre. One issue that I plan to raise with the Employment Minister on Thursday involves the proposal to close three out of four of our local jobcentres, which is ridiculous given that territorialism and gang culture are still issues in my area. One example that I mention here regularly is Wellhouse and Easthall, which are literally separated by a road into two communities, both of which are small but have their own community centres and housing associations. The work that Andy Gilbert is doing in Easthall is to be commended; he is reaching out to attract young people to the Glenburn centre who might otherwise be at risk of offending.

I was delighted last week to meet Young Movers, also based in Easthall. The organisation does a lot of work on youth empowerment, and I was pleased to hear about its recent efforts in the park at Sandyhills, where about 20 young folk had been hanging about causing trouble and engaging in antisocial behaviour. Through youth empowerment, Young Movers has managed to get them to set up a youth club, which has removed the antisocial behaviour in that part of Sandyhills.

Another organisation is Street League, which is UK-wide; it has operations in 14 cities around the UK and is led in my constituency by Brian Lennox. It has had good outcomes in terms of reducing antisocial behaviour in Glasgow, particularly in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). It ran a programme that cut antisocial behaviour in the Carlton area by 80% through street football, which is to be commended. Another organisation, which the hon. Member for Strangford already discussed, is Street Pastors. It does excellent work, particularly in Glasgow city centre at chucking-out time for the nightclubs; he mentioned initiatives to hand out flip-flops and similar things. I commend Stuart Crawford, a good personal friend of mine, who leads that organisation.

To return to the point about police budgets, we in Scotland have committed to protecting revenue budgets in real terms for the entirety of the next five years, delivering £100 million in investment over the next five years. I would like to ask the Minister about VAT. Police Scotland is the only force in the UK subject to
VAT; it has cost the Scottish Government £140 million since 2013. I hope that in the Budget next month, the UK Government will do the right thing and ensure that Police Scotland is not subject to VAT. Once we can release that money back into the police force, we can reduce antisocial behaviour in our constituencies.

10.36 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on his tour de force describing the growing issue of antisocial behaviour in our communities, particularly the consequences of reckless and brutal police cuts.

It is common sense that we cannot tackle antisocial behaviour and crime without a well-resourced neighbourhood policing presence. It is an irreplaceable component of the battle to keep our communities safe, and it has been steadily undermined and eroded over the past seven years. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) discussed the use of police dogs to tackle drug abuse. That was excellent to hear, but there has also been a massive reduction in the number of dog handlers throughout the country. Ten years ago, South Yorkshire had 54; we now have 12. Furthermore, his own police force, Devon and Cornwall, is being forced to merge with Dorset amid significant funding challenges. We welcome collaboration and efficiencies, but it is alarming to see forces taking decisions that might be harmful to police accountability on the basis of funding challenges.

Kevin Foster: The shadow Minister says that the two forces are being forced to merge; they are not. They have had a strategic alliance for quite some time, and it now makes sense to bring the two forces together. She would have found that out if she had spoken to any of the Members for Devon or Cornwall.

Louise Haigh: The chief constables, in their press release, said that the merger was brought about amid significant funding challenges. We welcome collaboration and efficiencies, but it is alarming to see forces taking decisions that might be harmful to police accountability on the basis of funding challenges.

Over the past seven years, 20,000 police officers and more than 30,000 police staff have been cut. The crimes that concern the public most—knife crime, gun crime, violent crime and acquisitive crime—are all on the rise. Demand across the board, especially on non-crime issues such as mental health, is soaring. At a time of unprecedented terrorist threats, the number of armed officers is down. Yet among all those competing demands, my hon. Friend the member for Birmingham, Selly Oak painted a compelling picture of why it is so important to take antisocial behaviour seriously. Time and again, it is an issue raised by our constituents. It blights lives and can make people prisoners in their own homes.

Undoubtedly, the reduction in neighbourhood policing has left our communities at risk. Alongside the incredible quotes read by my hon. Friend from a variety of chief constables, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and community inspectors said earlier this year that the model of neighbourhood policing is being eroded. In calling for urgent action, HMIC warned that “the position on crime prevention and local policing continues to deteriorate.”

The blame lies clearly and squarely with the Government. The voices raising concerns do not stop there. Over the summer, one of the most senior police leaders in the country—Sara Thornton, who weighs her words carefully—said:

“We’re particularly concerned about the resilience of local neighbourhood policing. Withdrawal from communities risks undermining their trust in us, at a time when we need people to have the confidence to share information with us.”

The Government have been told time and again that police forces are increasingly unable to provide the service that the public expect. They are rationing their time, which is pushing reports of antisocial behaviour, among a host of other demands, to the back of the queue. At the Budget, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) said, the Government must get a grip. Forces urgently need a real-terms funding increase that matches their needs and that recognises the record demand they face, having lost 20,000 officers and £2.6 billion since 2010. The status quo is not an option.

If we are to tackle ASB effectively, the Government must get to grips not only with resources but with some crucial practical issues. As we have heard, people are incredibly frustrated with the performance of 101 across the country. They can wait for more than half an hour to report ASB or crime and they feel that the police will not act on the report and that it will fall into an intelligence black hole. The police can have all the evidence and intelligence they like, but that is useless without the analysts and officers to act on them. Will the Minister consider conducting an assessment of the performance of 101 and of which forces are demonstrating best practice in the area? Some forces have excellent online reporting mechanisms, but that is far from consistent across all forces.

On data analysis, I direct the Minister to the recent report by the Royal United Services Institute, “Big Data and Policing”. I recommend its suggestion for a national data strategy and policy for the police. It is deeply frustrating that expertise and practice have to be replicated across 43 forces, especially when they are struggling even to provide core response services.

On legislation, we have heard about the problems associated with the downgrading of ASBOs to civil injunctions. With CBOs, the same challenges persist that existed with ASBOs for police on the ground. A considerable amount of police work goes into preparing a CBO case but, from speaking to those on the frontline, it seems that CBOs are not respected in the round by the judiciary. I have heard many examples of the police working with councils and other services to provide individuals with interventions that have repeatedly failed. They have turned to a CBO as a last resort, only to have it thrown out of court almost immediately. Under the previous legislation under Labour, the judge or magistrates were required to explain why they would not grant an ASBO, but that is not the case for a CBO.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak pointed out, we have no measure of the effectiveness of the Government’s ASB strategy. We certainly do not measure or hold to account the wider criminal justice system’s use and implementation of ASB legislation. Will the Minister consider raising with
her Ministry of Justice colleagues the need for better training and awareness of ASB measures and for putting in place a review of how and when CBOs are granted by the courts to establish whether they are being used properly?

One of the positive things about CBOs is that they require some positive action from the offender. That is fantastic in theory, but in practice the third-sector and public providers either no longer exist or do not have the funding to work with and support offenders with CBOs. Will the Minister consider commissioning research to establish how that is working in practice? For example, Durham Constabulary is doing some excellent work through the programme Checkpoint, which I recommend to her. The problem, however, is that, although the cost savings from reducing reoffending and diverting from court are felt across the criminal justice system, the police are currently footing the entire bill. That is simply unsustainable.

We have heard about moped and bike-enabled crime from several hon. Members, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who has conducted an excellent campaign on it. It is menacing communities nationwide. Bikes are used not just to plague residents with ASB, but for much more serious crime associated with drugs and violence. A significant part of the issue is the decimation of youth services, but an effective police response is a crucial part of the solution.

We have been calling for the Government to get a grip, not least through a review of police pursuit policy. In recent months, both the Minister and the Independent Police Complaints Commission were adamant that the current Crown Prosecution Service guidance was adequate for protecting the police. It was good to hear the Government think again and announce a review recently. Pursuit and response drivers across the country will be watching with interest. Many tell me that effectively they are forced to operate under a no-pursuit policy, as they do not have the confidence that if—God forbid—someone got hurt during that pursuit, they would not be prosecuted, even if they had followed their force pursuit policy to the letter.

Jim Shannon: There have been incidents across the United Kingdom in which people on mopeds have removed their helmets so that police following them feel they must pull back. There are so many conditions and restrictions on the police. As the hon. Lady says, it is important for the Minister to address that.

Louise Haigh: That is exactly the problem. The message is out there that the police are not able to pursue, and offenders are freely removing their helmets or carrying on under that impression.

The lack of protection for the police was amply demonstrated last week by the case of PC Simon Folwell, who was involved in February last year in the pursuit of a vehicle. The car crashed into a lamp post and, tragically, the driver died. The CPS ruled no further action on the case on two separate occasions, yet the IPCC still pressed for a gross misconduct hearing. The officer was finally cleared last week after an 18-month investigation.

No one is suggesting for a second that the police be given blanket licence to pursue, but if officers have followed their training, their force policy and the law, they should not be treated as suspects. Will the Minister confirm what the review’s terms of reference will be and when she expects it to report?

In conclusion, I beg the Minister to put our case to the Treasury in the strongest possible terms ahead of the Budget. Policing simply cannot continue in its current form with this level of demand and with no additional resource. Does she acknowledge the importance of neighbourhood policing and recognise that the rise in crime and antisocial behaviour is at least partly due to cuts to that important function? I reiterate our ask that the Government properly measure their ASB strategy and review the pursuit policy, to give the police the confidence to do their job and our constituents the confidence that their safety and fears are taken seriously.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing this debate. Addressing antisocial behaviour is important not only to all Members present, but to so many Members across the House, because it is important to all the communities we represent.

I want to underline, as I was asked to confirm, that it is the first responsibility of Government to keep people safe. In doing so, we want to ensure that the police have the resources to deliver good neighbourhood community policing. That is the cornerstone of our policing, which makes it distinctive compared with police forces around the world. It plays a significant role in the public confidence that people have in our police force, which is actually increasing. There has been liberal use of statistics in this debate, but one thing that we cannot be in doubt of is the crime survey, a robust data set that is acclaimed throughout the world for its integrity. It looks at how people feel and their experiences of crime. It shows growing support for the police—up to 78%—and public perception that traditional crimes are falling.

We welcome the rise in police-recorded crime because, as the Office for National Statistics says, that is the result of better work by the police. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak recognised that as an improvement. We have also introduced lots of new offences for hidden crimes—sexual offences, domestic abuse and violence, stalking offences, revenge porn—that were not measured in the past because they were not crimes. I am proud of our record in government of facing up to these hidden crimes and encouraging victims to come forward who would have previously been too frightened.

I have listened carefully to the wide range of very good points made today. As hon. Members can see, I have very few minutes left to address such wide-ranging and detailed questions, but I will write back in detail responding to each request for further action or information.

I stress from the outset the importance I attach to how the Government and public services respond to antisocial behaviour. Noisy, inconsiderate neighbours, drunken and unruly behaviour on our streets, and nuisance in our public spaces undermine the pro-social values of the law-abiding majority. They can have a debilitating
effect on the people subject to them, particularly when they happen day in, day out. I recognise that people can feel like prisoners in their own homes.

I also want to say how sorry I am that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak was recently the victim of a very nasty attack. That must have been a very frightening experience and I hope that he is feeling much better. I will do everything I can to support him and to see what work he is doing in his community to tackle what is clearly a spate of totally unacceptable antisocial behaviour that may be related to an increase in gang activity around drug use and county lines.

I have put a lot of effort into tackling that issue, and I have had a huge amount of support from police chiefs across the country. We have put extra investment into area-based reviews. As many people have said today, we need better intelligence, better data and more sharing of information among local agencies if we are going to bring together not only the police but all the other agencies that can make a difference in safeguarding vulnerable individuals and keeping communities safe. Following this debate, I will be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to look at the particular circumstances he has mentioned and see what further resources and further support we can deliver in his community to help him to keep it safe.

Crime is antisocial by its very nature but one thing concerns me—it has been referred to in this debate. At one end of the spectrum, we have daily incidents of misbehaviour and nuisance. Unpleasant as they may be, they require a particular response and we have an effective regime to tackle them. However, a lot of what we have heard about today is actually criminal behaviour. Where Parliament has created offences and given police officers and the criminal justice system the powers to go after the perpetrators of those crimes, I expect the full force of the law to be used. Many of the examples of antisocial behaviour that we have heard about today are serious criminal offences. Parliament has created a range of new and flexible powers—six in total—that are designed to enable not only the police but local authorities to respond to antisocial behaviour, to nip the concerns in the bud and to prevent their escalation into more serious offences.

We recognise that antisocial behaviour happens in different communities and different parts of the country, and that it has several different features. We have heard lots of examples today. We need to empower professionals on the frontline to make decisions about what powers they want to take that will really keep their communities safe. Of course, they are responsible for how they use those powers. I reassure Members that those powers are safe. Of course, they are responsible for how they use them, but it is clearly a very important response to how we want to take that will really keep their communities safe.

Mr Howarth: It is reassuring that all that work is going on, but at the end of the day it does not alter the fact that, even where powers already exist, if the police do not have the resources—they say that they often do not have the resources—to exercise those powers, the problem cannot be tackled.

Sarah Newton: I have carefully listened to the point that the right hon. Gentleman and all other colleagues have made about the capacity of the police to respond effectively to antisocial behaviour. Of course, the Government and I recognise that it is crucial that police have the right resources and capabilities and the powers that they need to keep the public safe. That is why we ensured that in the 2015 spending review the overall funding for the police was protected in real terms.

In addition to that funding, of course, there is the police transformation funding. We have heard today about the way in which the nature of crime is changing and it is important that we invest in new skills and new tools to enable the police to recognise those changes, take them into account and to go after the criminals effectively. There is £175 million in the police transformation funding alone.

Let us look at the west midlands. Following a public consultation, the police and crime commissioner put forward a budget for 2017-18, which was approved by the police and crime panel in early February. That budget is enabling the recruitment of 800 new police officers, 150 more police community support officers and 200 specialist police staff; those are all being recruited as we speak. Across England and Wales, in the last six months, the overall number of police officers has risen, and the number of officers joining is up by 60%, compared with this time last year. So more police officers are being recruited.

David Hanson: On that point about protecting the budget, can the Minister say how much of that is central Government funding and how much of it is allowing local precepts to be raised?

Sarah Newton: The vast majority of funding for the police comes from central Government, but the precept has always been an important part of funding policing. It ties police officers to their local communities in a very strong way. Police and crime commissioners, working with the public and the police, are responsible for deciding the local priorities and how they should be policed.

Everyone here has given examples from their own constituency of good partnership working. We know that there are complex challenges facing police officers, and they require the support of schools, social services and health services in their community. Like other colleagues here, I have the great privilege to go up and down the country to see excellent examples of partnership working, which enables smarter working and more people to be kept safe in our communities.

This debate has been important in many ways. We have not only talked about antisocial behaviour; we have also touched on some of the emerging crime areas. We have heard about the issues of moped and motorcycle-enabled crime; the use of acid as a weapon; the increases in knife crime; psychoactive substances and their effect, particularly on homeless communities around our country; and the increase in gangs in certain areas.
In the remaining few minutes that I have, I want to assure hon. Members that we are working with great pace, urgency and determination to tackle those threats. We know that, although crime in those areas, compared with 2010, has fallen, in the last 12 months or so, there have been real rises. Some of this is about better police recording, but I accept that we are seeing increases in violent crime.

That is why we have set up a series of taskforces to bring in industry, academics, the police themselves, NGOs and victims’ organisations to ensure that we leave no stone unturned and that we are considering how powers are exercised. We have talked about the pursuit power review and about the work that we are doing to ensure that police officers feel empowered to stop and search people in an appropriate way. We are looking at new offences of possession of acid. We are looking at what more we can do to prevent young people from getting hold of offensive weapons. However, what is probably more important than anything else is the work that we are doing to ensure that young people are resilient and receive a good education and support, so that they can make good choices that keep them away from gangs and the violence that not only blights their lives but blights their community.

Therefore, we are investing more new money into community-led area-based reviews and into providing support for grass-roots organisations that work with young people who are tempted into crime and who are being criminally exploited. We work with organisations that have a good track record of helping people to exit gangs. There is also work in schools to raise awareness of the harms of being drawn into violent crime and carrying knives. That is new funding; only recently £400,000 has been added to the funding for that locally.

In the final few moments that I have, I reassure the Members present that we absolutely understand that we must have a well-resourced police force, and we will continue to do everything we can to support the police in the incredibly good job they do to keep us safe, in challenging times, day in and day out.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Do you want 20 seconds to wind up?

Steve McCabe indicated dissent.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I thought not. Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered tackling aggressive anti-social behaviour.

Catalan Independence Referendum

11 am

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I beg to move, That this House has considered the effect of the Catalan independence referendum on the EU.

I speak today as the new chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Catalonia and as someone who observed the referendum in Catalonia last Sunday. I was part of a parliamentary delegation from the European countries and beyond, which included my hon. Friends the Members for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and Lord Rennard from the other place.

This debate is about the effect of the independence referendum on the European Union. It is also our first brief opportunity, while staying in order I hope, Mr Bailey, to examine the referendum itself, the run-up to it, the events surrounding it and the consequent fallout, which continues. It is, indeed, a fast-changing situation. This evening the Catalan Parliament will debate the referendum, and it may declare independence, unilaterally, or some other status, postpone such a declaration or propose some other course—we just do not know. The Spanish Government may invoke article 155 of the Spanish constitution, taking power in Catalonia to themselves. Those are the events with which we may have to contend.

This debate is on the effect of the Catalan referendum on the EU. I should say that I applied for it some weeks ago, when I foresaw that the referendum could be contentious and was aware that the consequences for the EU had hardly broken the surface of political discourse here in the UK, and in most EU member states. That was well before the actions of the Central Government in Madrid and before the likely consequences had become clear.

Recently, we have only once been really close to a so-called internal enlargement of the EU, with the Scottish referendum. The debate then, in respect of the consequences for the EU, was passionate but, for many, inconclusive and unresolved. However, the issue will not go away. Thinking about the parts of Spain—Galicia, the Basque country perhaps—Belgium, and Scotland again perhaps, as far as I can see the EU is as queasy as ever about facing up to the reality.

We have a Minister here, so this is also an opportunity for the UK Government to make any comments they wish to MPs. As far as I know, the Government have chosen not to do so up to now, other than the reference by the Prime Minister yesterday, when questioned during her statement on the EU by the chair of the British-Spanish all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). The Foreign Secretary has, I think, at some point tweeted that the referendum is a matter for Spain, that its constitution should be respected and that Spain is a close ally and a good friend. He also said that he was worried about the violence, but he made no condemnation of it.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): In our experiences in Catalonia just last week, it struck all of us who attended, I think, that if that level of violence had been carried out by state police at a football match or a pop concert, the European Union and the Commission would have made a strong statement.
of condemnation, as would the British Government if a British team been involved in a game at which such violence had taken place.

**Hywel Williams**: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. He makes a fair point. In fact, someone remarked to me that had events such as those in Catalonia occurred further away—perhaps not in an EU member state, perhaps in a poorer country—politicians throughout Europe would have been on their feet preaching democratic values. The silence from so many EU leaders is extremely concerning.

In the European Parliament, the European Commission’s First Vice-President, Frans Timmermans, condemned the efforts to hold an independence referendum as a violation of the Spanish constitution and therefore, significantly, as a threat to the rule of law in all EU countries. He said:

“violence does not solve anything in politics”,

and I agree. He continued:

“However, it is of course a duty of any government to uphold the rule of law and this does sometimes require the proportionate use of force”.

Those of us who witnessed the actions of the police on 1 October, could scarcely believe that he used the word “proportionate”. What we saw was far from proportionate.

President Juncker said that the vote in Catalonia was not legal and that the matter was an internal one for Spain, and he called on all the relevant players to move to dialogue. Those statements are just not good enough. They do not address the political reality, which is that 90% of those who voted were for independence. This is, essentially, a political question, and the fact that the Spanish Government resort to the law—which is, in many ways, feasible—but do not address the political issue other than, of course, their seeming move towards taking control in Catalonia again, is extremely concerning. The echoes from Spain’s history are very troubling.

Belatedly, Enric Millo, the Spanish Government’s representative in Catalonia, said in a television interview:

“When I see these images, and more so when I know people have been hit, pushed and even one person hospitalised, I can’t help but regret it and apologise on behalf of the officers that intervened.”

There is a great deal in that statement with which I could take issue, including the word “intervened”, because it was much more than an intervention. I welcome the fact that the Spanish Government’s representative said that, but it is belated, because we have waited many days for that sort of response. The Spanish Prime Minister initially said a great number of things, such as that there was no referendum in Catalonia on Sunday—a denial of reality that took my breath away. He also asserted—I paraphrase—that the actions of the Spanish police were a model to be admired throughout the world. There is a huge reluctance on his part and the part of his minority Government to face up to the political reality of what is happening in Catalonia.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman was genuinely prescient in applying for the debate when he did. Does he agree that the job of politicians is to talk to people they disagree with, to try to find ways of agreeing without resorting to violence? Given that Catalonia has submitted 19 formal requests to the Spanish state for talks on the constitution and to date 19 of them have been rejected, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the honourable and courageous thing for the Spanish state to do now would be to offer to talk to Catalonia, to find a solution that respects the will of the people of Catalonia but also respects the desire of the rest of Spain to maintain its constitutional integrity?

**Hywel Williams**: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The impression has been given, not least in the UK press, that Catalonia has moved to this position almost on a whim; that it is being deliberately obstructive and destructive. There is no time to go into the constitutional history of the matter, and I would probably not be in order if I did so, but suffice it to say that the status of Catalonia appeared to have been settled in 2006 with an agreement between Barcelona and Madrid. However, that agreement was overturned and then significantly eroded by the judgments of the constitutional court in 2010. A series of events led the Catalan Government, almost in desperation, to move to a referendum.

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I am going to speak very briefly. The events we have seen over recent days and weeks are essentially state-sanctioned police brutality and abuse. There cannot be any tolerance or space for that in Europe—or any other part of the world, for that matter. We saw young people, women, older people—innocent, well-mannered Spaniards—abused, bloodied and attacked for having their say and expressing their views. I welcome the exercise of democracy, and I will always defend people’s right to vote and play their part in the democratic process.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman can make an intervention, but not a speech.

**Hugh Gaffney**: I fully support this debate. I personally do not believe in independence, but I believe in democracy. Last week, we saw disgraceful scenes, and we should have condemned them earlier than we did. I will finish on this point. I have tabled early-day motion 333, and I hope hon. Members will support it.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. That was a mini-speech. The hon. Gentleman has the right to make an intervention if the speaker is prepared to give way, but he does not have the right to make a speech.

**Hywel Williams**: I concur with the points that the hon. Gentleman made and those that he intended to make, which I suspect are similar to mine. He moves me on to my next point.

Mr Millo said:

“people have been hit, pushed and even one person...was hospitalised”.

In fact, 900 ordinary people trying to vote were injured, clubbed, stamped upon, pulled by the hair, shot at with rubber bullets and tear gassed. In addition—we must say this—about 30 police officers were injured. “Hit and pushed” does not begin to describe what was seen.

The European Union’s position on this political and, some might say, moral and democratic vacuum is wholly unsatisfactory. A symbol of that is the fact that one country has offered to mediate—Switzerland.
Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Nobody can condone any breaches of the rule of law, and we ask both sides to uphold it, but in this Parliament we must be very careful about taking sides. This is essentially a matter for the Spanish Government to resolve with the Catalans. It looks like there is a bit of good will on both sides, and we must urge them to come to a peaceful settlement.

Hywel Williams: I agree entirely with what the hon. Gentleman said at the end of his remarks.

Having witnessed what I saw in Catalonia on Sunday, I think it is incumbent on anyone who believes in the fundamental values of democracy to stand up, explain their views and act as honourable and honest witnesses, which is what I am trying to do.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I hope my hon. Friend will agree that if legislators are not allowed to legislate, democracy is hobbled.

Hywel Williams: Indeed. There is a philosophical argument, which we cannot go into today, about the competing legitimacies of the democratic mandate. The Catalan Government have a majority, which was properly established at an election. The Government in Madrid have a different view and, although they are a minority Government, are also elected. We could pursue that at length, but I will not do so now.

The fact that Switzerland has offered to mediate is indicative of the European Union’s failure to act, which is very troubling indeed, given that these events affect a very large EU partner—the eurozone’s fourth largest economy. Catalonia itself hosts large multinational companies and provides a large proportion of Spain’s tax take.

I believe that a line has been crossed in terms of how an EU member state believes it is proper to treat its citizens. That attitude may be dangerously contagious at the other end of the European Union, where there are growing concerns about right-wing authoritarianism. It is also disappointing, given that the UK has direct experience of an independence referendum in Scotland, which was held peacefully and largely within an agenda of respect. I am not going to ask the Minister a large number of questions, but did the Spanish Government solicit any views or advice from the UK Government about the Scottish experience? Was any such advice offered of the UK Government’s own volition? Clearly, we have relevant experience.

It would be impossible for me to close without referring directly to last week’s events and the background to them—I will do my best to stay in order. We were in Catalonia for five days as part of the international delegation. By now, people across the world will have seen pictures on television—or more likely on their computer screens—of the long queues of people standing for hours in the rain; of people trying to vote and being beaten back by the police; of ballot boxes being confiscated; of the police shooting rubber bullets and tear gas at the crowds; and of women and old people staggering, their heads streaming with blood. They will have also seen the counter-demonstrations—this relates to the point that the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) made—made up not just of the old supporters of Franco’s fascist party singing their anthem and giving straight-arm salutes, but of ordinary Spanish people in Madrid and other cities. In Barcelona, they included some of the people who did not turn out to vote, who are split between people who want change, people who want change but not independence, and people who just want all concerned to sit down and talk, which is a commendable view.

Let me conclude by talking about what the delegation saw on the ground and what our report says. We concluded that on the day, the referendum was carried out as fairly as possible. Officials worked hard to enable people to vote. The police had taken down the Catalan Government’s website, so in many cases officials could not access the electoral roll. Despite all that, the vote was, as far as we could see, as fair and scrupulous as possible.

The police’s behaviour was, in many cases, violent, oppressive and wholly disproportionate. I witnessed the police breaking into a polling station in the face of wholly non-violent opposition by hundreds of ordinary local people—men, women and even youths and children—who streamed to the polling station when they heard that the Guardia Civil were on their way. The ballot boxes containing many cast votes were carried out and away in heavy police vehicles. The crowd shouted, “Votarem!”—“We want to vote!”—and that was it: there was no violence.

Many people slept in polling stations overnight to ensure they could be opened in the morning. People showed astonishing patience, queuing in the rain for hours and meeting the police batons with determined and unshakeable non-violence, but nearly 900 people and 30 police were injured. That so many turned out is significant—2.26 million voters on a turnout of 42.3%—in the face of huge hostility from the central Government, reflected in the media beforehand, disruption of the process and widely reported police violence from the start.

I do not know what will become of all this. Given the Spanish Government’s attitude, many have said that they had already lost the argument before the referendum was held and would still have lost the argument had there been a majority against independence, which there was not, because minds have been changed. It was clear to me that for many Catalans, this had become a vote not just on independence but on a sticking point—on the democratic right to have a say and on the core European values of democracy, openness and self-determination. It was impeded and, in places, thwarted violently by a central Government whom they saw as being of little or no relevance to them, at best. That has profound significance for all parts of Europe, and the response from Governments and the EU itself has been wholly wanting.

11.19 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I congratulate the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) on securing this important debate and on all his work as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Catalonia. The Minister for Europe and the Americas is travelling on ministerial duties, which I am afraid is why I am responding on behalf of the Government. I am delighted once again to respond to a number of reasons. I have a holiday home in Majorca, in the Balearic Islands, where some of the issues are also playing out, so I am not entirely unaware of them.
Hon. Members, in the course of speechettes or interventions, have made several points and there is understandably strong feeling across a variety of shades of opinion about what is happening in Catalonia. It is entirely right and understandable that this place should have a keen interest in Spain, which is after all one of our closest and strongest European friends and allies. As many hon. Members know, we have a significant expatriate population living in Spain, including a significant number in the Catalonian region.

To be clear, while we must defend important principles brought into question by developments in Catalonia, we should remember that Spain is a sovereign nation and that ultimately—as my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) rightly pointed out—the situation in Catalonia is a matter for Spain to resolve, in accordance with Spanish law and democratic principles.

Douglas Chapman: Tonight at 5 o’clock, the Catalan Government will make a statement on how they see their future and whether they are to go for independence or another way. That is a decision for them. Given that to date Spain has been unwilling to talk or to accept mediation, and indeed is still issuing threats to Catalan parliamentarians, how does the Minister think that the British Government will react this evening? What kind of discussions do the Government hope to have with the EU and the Spanish Government, to use our influence in the region to ensure that mediation takes place and that there is a peaceful settlement rather than anyone resorting to the recent levels of violence that were totally unacceptable?

Mark Field: It is important to recognise that this is a fast evolving situation, as everyone has said. Let me confirm, in answer to the direct question from the hon. Member for Arfon, that over the past year the Spanish Government have made no attempt to ask our advice, nor have we solicited to offer any advice, about the conduct of the referendum or anything else. The one thing we can do, as a member of the European Union and as a sovereign nation and friend of Spain, is to make the relevant point that we want to dampen down the potential for running out of time, but if I can come back to the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I have a set text and am aware of the potential for running out of time, but if I can come back to the hon. Gentleman I will do so.

The Catalan regional Government are meeting today and, as has been pointed out, the possibility of some unilateral declaration of independence hangs in the air, despite the low turnout in last week’s vote and recent broader polling—if one believes opinion polling in politics these days—to suggest that a majority of Catalans would oppose independence. The decisions that the Catalan regional authorities take today and their consequences will affect the wellbeing and prosperity of not only all the people they represent, but all those throughout Spain. I hope, therefore, that they will consider very carefully the decisions that they take tonight, and the implications for the future.

As the hon. Member for Arfon rightly pointed out, the debate was initially to be about the effect of the Catalonia referendum on the EU, but events have moved on. President Juncker, in common with many European partners, shares the analysis that Catalonia is an internal matter for Spain. He has made clear the EU’s legal position that Catalonia would have to leave the EU if it became legally independent, which would have consequences for the people of the region, including visitors and businesses, some of whom are already considering their future, given the actions of the Catalan regional Government over the past couple of weeks.

Legal independence, however, is a hypothetical scenario not related to recent events, but where the hon. Gentleman is right—he recognises this—the sensitivities around the issue are profound in many European states, not only here in the UK but throughout Europe. That is one of the many reasons why it is probably sensible to look at the Swiss playing a mediating role, given the temptation for a number of separatist groups to draw a direct parallel with the situation in Catalonia that may not necessarily exist for their own part of Europe.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I know the Minister is running out of time, but may I caution him and anyone else about Swiss mediation, because we would not want them to mediate in the matter of Gibraltar?

Mark Field: That would obviously be an approved mediation in so far as both sides were keen and accepted that that should happen. Otherwise, as I said, it is an internal matter.

We should be clear that the purported referendum held on 1 October was illegal. On 7 September, almost a month before the vote took place, the Spanish constitutional court suspended the legislation calling for a referendum, making it clear that such an act would be illegal. None of the Opposition parties in the Catalan Parliament, which represent 51% of the Catalan electorate, considers that referendum to be valid. The vote was knowingly held in breach of the Spanish constitution and was therefore an attempt to undermine the rule of law. Not only that, it was a breach of the ‘law of Catalonia itself, which is something that has been largely overlooked, but its importance must not be understated. The reason that that must not be understated is that the rule of law is the essential foundation of any democratic society. The issue is not hypothetical but of tremendous importance to the EU and to us all.

Peter Grant: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: Forgive me, I will not, because I am running out of time.

The rule of law underpins all the values, rights and freedoms that are fundamental to our way of life. The UK Government feel strongly that it is in the interests of the UK and of the EU to defend that principle...
robustly. Failure to do so would diminish us all. What example would we be setting if we encouraged Governments around the world to embrace the rule of law, but did not uphold or defend it close to home?

For the people of Spain—there is a lot of history in this, as we all know about that country—the 1978 constitution has a particular significance. It was a key moment in the country’s peaceful transition to democracy after decades of dictatorship. The constitution was approved by the whole of Spain, including Catalonia, and it does not permit the Government to authorise the secession of any region of the country. That is the very basis on which the Spanish constitutional court deemed the referendum illegal. When supporters of the referendum speak of the democratic rights of self-determination for the people of Catalonia, we should remember that the Spanish constitution has protected the rights of Catalans and all Spaniards for several decades in Spain’s modern democracy. Those are the very rights that the Catalan regional Government seek to flout.

I have said that developments in Catalonia are a matter for Spain and Spanish constitutional law and democracy. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on the UK, European partners and like-minded democracies—I accept this—to stand up for the principles on which our own liberty depends. That is why the UK Government will continue to make it clear that we support the rule of law and respect for the Spanish constitution. Failure to do so risks undermining the cornerstone of any functioning democracy and European values.

I very much appreciate the concern expressed by many hon. Members about the actions of the Spanish authorities and the alleged excessive use of force. All of us who watched the television coverage were shocked by the events. No one wants to see violence on the streets. The role of the police is to uphold the rule of law, which must be respected by us all. The Spanish Government have apologised for what took place, which I hope will be helpful in finding a constructive way forward.

Aside from matters of principle, it is important to say that Spain is a great friend and ally of the United Kingdom and a key player in the EU. Its strength and unity matter to all of us. In July this year, Her Majesty the Queen hosted King Felipe and Queen Letizia on the first state visit to the UK by a Spanish monarch in 30 years. That visit was a great success and showed off our deep economic, political, cultural and academic ties.

Democracy is about more than just voting. Every democracy has its own rules, laws and procedures, setting out both rights and responsibilities. The ability of the UK and the EU to promote fair and free societies elsewhere in the world would be significantly affected if we compromised our commitment to those principles here in Europe. This Government continue to support a strong and unified Spain as a key partner for the UK and an influential actor in the EU now and in the future.

**Question put and agreed to.**

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
children, electricals, building machinery, medical equipment and many other products. It has been suggested that the CE mark could be replaced by a more global standard, but global standard setting in many areas is still limited and lacking in detail. Given that nearly half of British trade is with the EU, any large-scale divergence on standards could lead to technical barriers for British businesses trading in Europe, which is why the vast majority of British manufacturers want to keep a common marking scheme for standards, to avoid unnecessary costs.

However, we know that standards can be a tool for protectionism, to lock others out of a market, and it is important that British manufacturers retain a seat at the table where decisions are made. I hope that the Minister can update the House on the state of discussions regarding the future relationship between the British standards bodies and the European standard-setting bodies. Will we be able to retain our seat at those tables?

Changing the standard-setting regime would also raise questions about consumer safety. When I was a child, I lost my father in an accident that was caused by an electrical good. That would not happen today. The fire at Grenfell tower was started by an electrical good. That is exactly what we need to avoid. Standards must be protected by strong safety standards, on our exit from the EU and afterwards. I am delighted that Ministers have said that we will not be responsible for lowering standards as a result of Brexit and have committed Britain to continuing to be a global leader on safety standards.

As well as those standards, we have the networks and authorities that are necessary for ensuring that the standards work and are enforced. The UK is part of the Rapex network—the rapid alert system for dangerous non-food products—which means that other countries are notified when dangerous toys and goods are found on the market. That makes it easy for trading standards across the country, in Essex and elsewhere, to take dangerous goods off the market quickly and keeps consumers safe. There is a similar system in the medical world; the pharmacovigilance network ensures that medical authorities and drugs companies across Britain are notified if a patient has an unexpected response to a drug, which helps to keep patients safe.

As part of Europe, we take part in the consumer protection co-operation network, which allows a British authority to ask an authority in another country to begin an investigation if it thinks that standards have been abused or consumer protection law has been broken. That is being used to help hundreds of British consumers involved in the French leaseback scandal, many of whom may have lost their life savings, and it helps to keep our financial products safe.

It is in the interests of consumers on both sides of the channel that we not only retain the European legislation but continue to be part of the co-operation networks that support it. It would be helpful if the Minister confirmed that the deep, special and bespoke partnership that the Prime Minister has mentioned will lead to exactly that type of co-operation.

I am not saying that EU consumer protection laws are perfect; in many areas, they are not, and Brexit will provide us with an opportunity to look again at burdensome areas. Anyone who listens to commercial radio stations will see that read very quickly at the end of every radio advertisement for a mortgage or a financial services package. Apparently, less than 4% of consumers actually remember any of those details. That is all laid down in the consumer rights directive, and we may choose to diverge on such details. That is precisely why it is important that we have an ongoing mechanism for talking about future legislation and for enabling divergences.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech that I think everyone in the Chamber is glad to be able to hear. She made the point that high product standards and consumer protection are good for customers, and obviously they are. Does she agree that they are also good for British businesses? When our businesses go to those high standards, that makes them competitive globally because of their reputation for providing goods of high quality.

Vicky Ford: I agree, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Interestingly, when the consumer organisation Which? surveyed British businesses, it found that those businesses, too, want to ensure that consumer interests are properly considered and maintained as part of the Brexit negotiation. That is precisely why British manufacturers say, “We want to continue to be part of the product-setting networks. We must have a seat at the table when they are agreed.” There are non-EU countries where manufacturers and standard-setting bodies are involved in the negotiations on the standards. It should be perfectly possible to maintain that in a deep and special relationship. It is in the interests of both parties.

It is also important to remember that consumer legislation continues to evolve. We need to ensure that legislation keeps up with the digital age. The digital world is increasingly borderless: our consumers are buying products not just from local retailers but, increasingly, from large global retailers, so it is important that we have international agreement on consumer issues. As I have said, the global forums for setting standards, particularly on digital consumer issues, often lack detail. Therefore, co-operation with Europe is necessary.

A key part of digital trade relates to the use of data. The ability of consumers to use comparison sites and to get consumer feedback means that they are increasingly empowered and informed. Our consumers need data.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): As has already been said, my hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. She talks about consumers making informed decisions. Does she see an opportunity with Brexit to take things further? One of my campaigns is for the opportunity to expand country of origin food labelling to allow consumers to make a more informed choice. We could expand the products that country of origin food labelling could be applied to.

Vicky Ford: Consumer choice is key, and I will discuss food standards, especially when I talk about trade relationships with other parts of the world. Being able to make a consumer decision increasingly relies on being able to access data, to go on to a database and to work out where to make a purchase in a digital world. The free flow of data also underpins digital streaming services, retail loyalty cards and use of cloud computing services. Without the free flow of data, businesses—but also consumers—would find themselves at a disadvantage.
Later this week, we will debate the future of data post-Brexit in the main Chamber. I contend that it is extraordinarily important for British and European consumers that we continue to have a free flow of data post-Brexit. Without that, British consumers will find that they cannot access information or comparison sites in anything like the detail they can at the moment, and many European companies will find significant barriers to their own business. There is no world trade agreement on digital data flows, so it is important that a decision is made on that area.

Another area I want to speak about in detail is the travel sector, because unless agreements are made in favour of consumers on travel, they will face significant impacts. For many consumers, the main impact of Brexit will be what happens on their holidays. The rest of Europe remains the most popular destination for British travellers. In 2015, British citizens made 32 million trips to the rest of the EU on holiday; EU citizens made 9 million trips to Britain. Two hundred million passengers fly through British airports every year.

As we all know, unless negotiated, the UK will lose access to the EU common aviation area, which risks affecting both flights from Europe into Britain and flights in the UK. There are also the many aviation agreements—more than 50—that the EU has with the rest of the world on airspace issues. It is imperative that access to airspace and landing rights is negotiated. Last week, we saw 100,000 people having problems with flights when Monarch collapsed. If there is no agreement or action on flights, tens of millions of consumers will be affected. That is why it is so good that the Government have started work on the areas that will be most affected if there is not a deal.

Aviation safety is also really important. The UK is currently covered by the European Aviation Safety Authority and, unless we continue to be a member of that, the Civil Aviation Authority will have to set up an equivalent, which would take time. That is precisely the sort of issue that needs a decent, long, thought-through transition period so that safety is not risked due to a cliff edge of uncertainty. Furthermore, today under EU law when flights are delayed or cancelled, passengers have a right to reimbursement or repatriation. It is important that we know whether those rights will continue. Airline tickets go on sale about 10 months before the first flights, so from next summer the airline companies will be trying to offer flights in a post-Brexit world and they need to know what rights go with their tickets.

Furthermore, non-air transport issues need to be considered. Today, British drivers are covered by the motor insurance green card, which means that we can drive from our homes across to the continent using our own motor insurance and that, if we have an accident while in the EU, the insurance will cover claims and compensation. If the green card arrangements are no longer in place, drivers may need additional insurance cover, which is especially important not just to individual consumers but to the freight transport sector.

I was glad to hear in the Chamber yesterday that another issue for travellers seems to have been resolved: the European health insurance card. There are about 27 million EHICs in the UK and last year those cards would have been used by more than 200,000 British travellers. Both sides—Europe and the UK—have said that they wish that to remain. It needs to be agreed in detail, but that does show that progress is being made on these key issues.

The final issue for travellers I want to mention is mobile roaming. This summer, my children certainly cheered when they got on the plane and found out that they would be able to use their phones without additional costs. Abolishing roaming charges has been especially popular with younger people. I know how extraordinarily tricky it was to negotiate that, having played a part in the negotiations myself. A deal on roaming and other digital issues needs to be a key part of our future trade agreement with the EU—and indeed of all future trade agreements.

Brexit gives us the opportunity to create new consumer-focused trade policy. That brings many benefits. Trade agreements bring consumer choice, variety, lower prices and the right to be able to buy products from many different countries of origin, including our own, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) correctly pointed out. However, we know that consumer confidence cannot be taken for granted. There have been many recent reactions and protests by consumers against trade agreements, particularly the proposed EU-US trade agreement, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. As a member of the European Parliament, I remember receiving more than 10,000 emails over one weekend, nearly all of them different, about TTIP.

Consumers recognised the benefits of cheaper goods and services, but they also said firmly that this should not come at any cost. In particular, the public would be concerned about any drop in standards on food or animal welfare products. That is why the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer are both right to point out that it is in the interest of businesses to maintain standards, but also important that people know where their food especially is coming from.

The TTIP experience shows the problem of a disconnect between the public and the negotiators on trade issues and points to the need for transparency. It shows that the public and consumer organisations need to be involved in trade negotiations. It is important that those of us who want to continue to have a free market economy and free trade with the rest of the world prioritise the opportunities from the consumer’s perspective.

That is why it is important that we focus on issues such as mobile roaming and the real barriers that travellers face, so that they can see we are focused on the issues that consumers focus on. Brexit offers an opportunity for both the UK and EU to rethink and reset our approach to how we trade with each other and those across the world, but it will only retain the support of the public if consumers and consumer protection are put at the heart of the policy.

2.51 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on securing the debate and on her obvious passion for consumer issues.
There is often a good deal of complacency in this country when it comes to consumer protection. We often take it for granted; we only really think about our rights when we need to enforce them or seek compensation, and we expect it to be there. This country has quite a good record when it comes to consumer protection law. After all, did we not invent it in the 1970s, at the same time that we established the Office of Fair Trading? That might be a bit of an exaggeration, but we are highly regarded internationally for our consumer protection initiatives and—most pertinently in this debate—we have had an important influence on the scope of EU consumer protection legislation over the decades of our membership.

On many occasions, we have gone even further than the EU has required, as with the right to reject a product. As the consumer body Which? has pointed out, the limit is 30 days here, while the EU directive requires only 14 days. That is all very good, but as investment advisers like to warn, “Past performance is not an indicator of future results.” Many people are worried that the post-Brexit era will give us less to crow about. Certainly, many consumer bodies are worried that we could see a real watering down of consumer rights. It is not just consumer bodies that are worried: the Lords EU Justice Sub-Committee, in its ongoing inquiry on the subject, has observed that there is now a shadow hanging over consumer rights, with the Government’s approach to negotiation serving to “cast doubt over the continued application of this significant body of EU law that protects the consumer rights of millions of people in the UK.”

Some observers have taken comfort from the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which will transfer all directly applicable EU law on to the UK’s statute books. But what does this guarantee? The Government’s stated intention is that there will be no loss of protection while we remain in the EU, but that only gives us until March 2019, or a little longer if transitional arrangements are made, and what happens afterwards is uncertain. Will the various protections be unpicked over the coming years, perhaps to secure favourable bilateral trade agreements with countries that value consumer protection less highly than the EU? Or will they be reduced in a misguided belief that business simply regards consumer rights as barriers to trade and red tape? We must avoid that race to the bottom at all costs.

 Ministers have not made enough effort to reassure us about their long-term aims. While a business forum has been established with the likes of the British Chambers of Commerce, the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and others, there is no such equivalent when it comes to consumers. There are many expert consumer bodies out there, including Which?, Citizens Advice and MoneySavingExpert, but they do not feel that they are being properly consulted on what is needed after Brexit. Will the Government now commit to establishing a working group with these bodies and with legal services groups such as the Law Society?

We need a real commitment to putting the consumer at the heart of the Brexit negotiations. That commitment is all the more necessary because it is a question not just of domestic rights but of international ones, as we have heard. The critical issue for many consumers is how they will be protected when they buy goods from the EU, as they often do when they use internet sites such as Amazon—the 1974 protection is outdated on the credit card rule for internet purchases—or when they are travelling or holidaying abroad and want to hire a car or rent a hotel room.

What are the Government doing to ensure those reciprocal and cross-border rights? There is much discussion in the EU negotiations about people’s right to live and work in the EU and the right for EU residents to live and work here, but precious little about cross-border consumer rights. We have heard about mobile phone roaming fees, which were recently capped, and the EHIC. We have to secure these rights post-Brexit. They have been hard won. We cannot lose them.

The issue of reciprocity and cross-border rights must be an absolute priority, because this is the area where there is most uncertainty. At the moment, UK citizens are protected by various EU legislative measures when buying goods and services, such as the consumer rights and ecommerce directives, but after March 2019 that protection will not be automatic. I agree that we should look at these rights. We need to ensure they are updated to face the modern world. Unless agreements are reached with the EU, there is a real risk that consumers might not be able to enforce their rights in other member states. I hope we will not return to the days when the streets of Spain were more like the wild west, peopled by timeshare cowboys. When I was at the citizens advice bureau, I had a client who had bought three timeshares, one after the other, because the sellers of the first two had assured him that the agreements were cancellable. He ended up with three timeshares, having to negotiate Spanish law.

Some of these cross-border protections will depend on the UK’s continued co-operation with Europe-wide agencies, such as the European Food Safety Authority, the European Aviation Safety Authority, as well as the CPC, which is vital in detecting and stopping illegal commercial practices. We have collaborated well in the past: problems have been highlighted and enforcement has been co-ordinated. We must ensure that UK consumers continue to benefit from, and have confidence in, the high standards guaranteed by working with them. It would be good to know what the Government are doing to ensure that such collaborative work continues and whether they are working towards establishing a mutual recognition agreement on standards.

Enforcement is the watchword. Rights are of little use unless they can be enforced. Local trading standards officers are the foot soldiers when it comes to ensuring that unsafe counterfeit goods are stopped at the point of entry, but their vital work has been greatly undermined by funding cuts, as pinpointed in last year’s National Audit Office report. EU withdrawal will naturally add even greater complexity to their work. If they have to inspect every truck coming from the EU as well as those coming from outside, there will be a complete blockade of our ports. The Government must ensure that trading standards work is properly funded and that officers can continue to work closely with their international counterparts. For example, questions remain over the future of cross-border safety alerts via Rapex, which covers dangerous, non-food products, and access to the CPC, which has already been mentioned. If nothing is done, we could be facing a genuine crisis as vital surveillance and enforcement are pared back.
3 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on securing this debate. I will keep my comments brief, but as this is the Brexit Parliament, I welcome this opportunity to debate this important issue.

It is entirely right that as we go through the process of exiting the EU we should legislate to protect UK consumers and consumer rights. Indeed, the UK already goes beyond the minimum standard required by the EU in a number of areas. For example, UK consumers can reject goods that do not conform to the contracted sale within 30 days and receive a refund, whereas in the EU a refund is available only after replacement or repair. That is just one example, but the principle that we hear espoused to support it is already enshrined in UK law, so we need to use that example to make sure that we continue to protect UK consumer rights.

I recognise some of the comments from my colleagues in opposition, but I think that we should try to focus on Brexit as a real opportunity to strengthen consumer rights internationally, rather than raising red flags and—I do not want to use the word “scaremongering”—always focusing on the negative things that could happen, rather than the positives that the UK could put forward by operating internationally.

A prime example is the Consumer Rights Act 2015, which I referenced earlier. Introduced by the Conservative-led Government, it resulted in a marked strengthening of consumer rights in legislation, and it provides the precedent Members may seek when looking for reassurances from Conservative-led Governments on consumer rights. Among the safeguards provided, some of which I mentioned earlier, is the increase from seven days to 14 days in which consumers can return any item bought in a shop, online or over the phone. More crucially, the Act ensures for the first time that consumers were protected on the purchase of digital content, such as online films, games and books, with the clear right to replacement or repair, which is important in an increasingly digital world. I am assured that the Government are focusing on the right policy, securing the right direction of travel and legislating accordingly to make sure that we are leading the EU, not following it.
addition to the progress that has already been made and which I outlined earlier. I hope to work with Ministers and colleagues across the House to ensure that, as we debate the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, and then the substantive Bills that will follow on customs and trade, we prioritise strengthening the hands of regulators and online consumers, making terms and conditions clearer—an issue that is recognised by consumers and institutions across the United Kingdom—and strengthening the powers of consumer enforcement bodies to include fines against companies breaking consumer law, and delivering redress for wronged parties. The desire and intent to protect consumer rights is clear and we must ensure that we carry on in that manner as we go through and complete the process of leaving the EU.

3.7 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on securing this debate and on her excellent opening remarks. I declare my interests, as in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: previously I was a legal counsel at BT responsible for, among other things, consumer law compliance.

The UK is a leader in consumer rights, exemplified, as the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said, by the Consumer Rights Act 2015, in which we went above and beyond European requirements, but that direction of travel has been, in my view, driven by the European Union. As we prepare for Brexit, whatever that might mean, it is vital that we protect both our current legal framework and our future policy commitments to maintain strong consumer protections in the UK. If we maintain access to the European single market, as is my preference, ensuring equivalence in consumer law in the future will be vital.

In my previous role, I attended the annual consumer law conference in Brussels, hosted by the European Commission. I was there on behalf of not only business but consumer groups and other stakeholders. It was agreed, among a very large group of stakeholders, that the consumer law framework provided by the European Union and legislated for here in the UK was pretty good. The key issue, however, was enforcement of those consumer rights. It is vital that we keep that in mind in this Parliament too, not only through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but in what we do next, after the date of Brexit.

I have had the pleasure, or misfortune depending on one’s viewpoint, of rewriting and simplifying consumer terms and conditions for TV, broadband, mobile services and such like, hence my declaration at the top. Having to take out liability clauses, disclaimers and warranties and trying to reach, as I did in that example, for Plain English Crystal Marks and simplifications for consumers brings us lawyers out in a bit of a cold sweat. We must call on businesses in a regulatory-friendly manner to innovate in the way they communicate with customers. We know that customers tend not to read even a short number of pages on terms and conditions, so how can we ensure that, where the law already provides, they are made aware of particularly onerous terms? I, for example, commissioned a short video explaining that in two minutes. Whether anybody watched the video, let alone read the terms and conditions, time will tell.

From my own experience, we must have two aims—first, that customers understand what it is they are signing up to, which is the law today, and secondly, that they know how to enforce their rights and that they choose to do so. Although this is an issue across many sectors, I will make some remarks today about the airline industry, which is topical because of the issues with Ryanair in recent weeks. As the hon. Member for Chelmsford said, millions of constituents across the country fly to the European Union every year. Although we must protect important safeguards on cancellations and flight delays through Brexit, we must also remember the enforcement of domestic consumer rights.

Many of our constituents suffer the annual annoyance of additional charges for printing boarding passes, booking seats, or getting a bag on to a flight when they thought those things were included. Many airlines market through comparison websites, which may require further regulation in future. They show the single fare-only price without the additional charges. So when customers think about getting the best deal for their flights, sometimes they are unaware that the airlines may be bulking out their revenues by stinging customers with additional charges at the point of service.

Additional charges in themselves are not unfair or a problem, but when many customers do not know about them until it is too late or have no idea how to enforce their rights when they have been subjected to unfair treatment, such charges become a problem. I myself have experienced that problem. On a recent flight to Iceland with WOW airlines, my wife and I were forced to pay £75 to get our on-board luggage through the departure gate. That was more than the price of the ticket itself. As a consumer rights lawyer, I said, “Don’t worry; let’s pay the fee. I’ll complain and get a refund. I know this consumer law business.” However, I faced a bit of a problem.

It transpired that the acceptable size for on-board baggage on WOW airlines is significantly smaller than for other budget airlines, but the online order journey did not make that clear. I have a penchant for terms and conditions and compliance with online order journeys and am particularly astute at watching out for such things, but I was unaware of that difference. I challenged WOW airlines when I returned from a lovely trip to Iceland, but the customer service was awful. I had copy and paste responses to my question. Clearly, other customers had challenged it because the company gave copy and paste answers. When I challenged the detail of the answer, I was told that the company would no longer speak to me.

I therefore complained to the ombudsman. The consumer ombudsman, which is a voluntary organisation for certain sectors and businesses, approached the airline, but it refused to take part in the voluntary scheme. I then drafted a letter before claim setting out in detail, on a lovely Sunday afternoon, how the airline had breached consumer law in the UK, and I sent it to the chief executive officer in Reykjavik. Normally at this point I get a response, but on this occasion I got no response. I still hold that the additional charges point on baggage where WOW airlines does not make it clear that its size restrictions are smaller than for other budget airlines, is a breach of consumer law. I feel that I and my constituents and others are due a refund for an unenforceable charge. Having raised the issue with the
airline's customer services team, the ombudsman, the chief executive and now Parliament, I look forward to a response.

The issue is not just about my story. In advance of this debate I posted a survey online to ask my constituents to tell me their stories, which were broadly similar. Most of the affected customers who completed my survey were annoyed about the additional baggage charges and also about seat reservations. Of those charged for their baggage, 75% had used the bag that they used for on-board storage with other airlines, and they did not know they could not use that bag on the airline that imposed the additional charge. Some 60% did not know about the charges at the point of booking, or they might have measured the suitcase. Again, these are unenforceable additional charges under consumer law.

To make matters worse, nearly 60% of complainants paid the fee, but then did not complain. A clear majority had no idea that they could go to the Civil Aviation Authority or others for support. Of all the customers in my survey who did complain, only one received a refund. Everybody else was either fobbed off or ignored.

Behind the statistics are families going on their holidays. Many of my constituents who use budget airlines and rely on other similar services save up throughout the year for a special time with their families during the summer holidays. It is a major expense in the annual budget of those consumers. The way in which the families are being treated is unacceptable.

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his passionate story about his holidays, but does he agree that it is in the consumer's interest to have choice and opportunity? Although there may have been drawbacks in some of the budget airline experiences, to be able to fly at a cost they can afford is a huge benefit to consumers.

We need good consumer protection and information, but not if the cost becomes unaffordable and consumers simply cannot afford the flights.

Darren Jones: But the issue with unaffordability comes at the departure gate when customers who use comparison websites and book flights they can afford based on the ticket price alone have no choice but to take the flight and go on their summer holiday with their children or go home. That is why additional charges need to be highlighted effectively and why families need the ability to enforce their rights.

One family told me a story about when they turned up at the airport in Bristol. They had not printed their boarding passes and were told they needed to pay £70 for them to be made available. If that was not bad enough, they then realised that they needed to pay an additional £75 for their children to sit next to them because they had not paid for the seat reservations. Why should families have to pay to make sure that their children can sit next to them and pay for the printed boarding pass when it is perhaps available on their phone? Again, those customers knew nothing about the charges and were stung as a consequence of the lack of compliance with consumer law.

Some sectors are better than others in their compliance with consumer law. The best brands, as we have heard this afternoon, understand that building consumer trust is good for businesses and that putting the customer first is therefore a sensible strategy. Under the Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013 and the Consumer Rights Act 2015, with the introduction of the concept of digital goods and services, we are making strides forward, but we must recognise that the law is already becoming out of date in the way in which the new digital economies are working.

To go to my original point, as we prepare for whatever Brexit means for the UK, it is vital that we not only protect our current framework of consumer law but that we work with our European colleagues to enhance the enforcement of consumer rights. We must continue to lead the debate as markets rapidly change and ensure that we protect our constituents not only under current law and in current markets but in future. I look to the Government to help us deliver that.

3.18 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Streeter, and the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

When it comes to Brexit, discussions here and in the media have tended to focus on high-level questions on trade deals, investment or diplomatic treaties. Important as the Brexit questions are, and the consequences will of course ultimately be significant, they are questions that can sometimes seem a little removed from the day-to-day life of many of our constituents. Today’s debate matters because it concerns something that has an immediate and constant relationship with almost everything that individuals, families and businesses do in my constituency of Weaver Vale and elsewhere. There is little more important in day-to-day life than having confidence in the quality of the food we eat, the effectiveness of the medicines we rely on, or the safety of the toys our children play with.

I want to pay particular tribute to the work that one of our north-west MEPs, Theresa Griffin, has been doing on this issue. Theresa and colleagues work every day on the detail that matters—in stark contrast to what we heard only yesterday from the Prime Minister, who made it clear that, 15 months on, the Government are no further forward in dealing with the detail that every hon. Member requires. Indeed, I should acknowledge the work that the hon. Member for Chelmsford did on these matters as a Member of the European Parliament.

Of course this debate is vital not just for consumers, but for businesses. One of the many fantastic features of my constituency is the range of its economy and industry—things that affect everyone. The logistics and distribution companies in Weaver Vale need certainty about what Brexit means for cross-border transport of the parcels and goods that they deliver. Household names in the pharmaceutical industry rely on the research and innovation work at Daresbury, and their success and prosperity is dependent on consumers having confidence in their products. I have every confidence that the famous Roberts Bakery will continue to produce some of the best bread anyone will taste, but to continue to be successful it will, like every food manufacturer, need certainty about the frameworks that it is working with.
As to one of the biggest challenges—the safety and value of data in the digital age—my constituency is affected at almost every level. At one end of the spectrum, many individual householders in Weaver Vale are currently locked in dispute with broadband providers about the quality of their service—or in some cases the complete lack of it. The EU is committed to achieving speeds of 1 gigabit per second by 2025. By contrast, the UK’s ambition is a mere 10 megabits per second—a hundredth of that speed. We are told by some members of the Government that we need to be “ambitious” about Brexit, but my constituents are being given 1% of what they might otherwise have been entitled to.

Vicky Ford: On the point about inadequate broadband—and, indeed, the mis-selling of broadband—perhaps I may bring to the hon. Gentleman’s attention the fact that during negotiations on the telecoms directive the Brits pushed for stronger regulation, to make it against the law for anyone to mis-sell broadband and promise higher speeds than they could get. The Europeans refused to introduce that measure. Brexit gives us an opportunity to take new measures on behalf of consumers, especially on issues such as broadband.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Mike Amesbury: Of course, my point was about speed; I sincerely hope that we will go beyond the current Government’s snail’s pace ambition and not only match but, in time, exceed the ambition of the EU. On that point the hon. Lady and I probably agree.

I was talking about my constituents getting only 1% of what they were entitled to, but at the other end of the spectrum my constituency is also at the digital forefront. For example, Sci-Tech Daresbury is the home of the Hartree Centre, an initiative leading on the application of high-performance computing and big data. It also houses many leading digital and tech companies. Its ambition is to expand the data storage/archive capability at Hartree. Those organisations have made it clear to me that the UK cannot significantly differ from the EU in terms of future data protection laws while maintaining any kind of working relationship. It is welcome that the Government appear committed to incorporating the general data protection regulation into UK law. The lesson must be how that important aspect of EU law can be expanded into other protections. However, the risks to the UK’s position as the digital hub of Europe, from leaving the EU, remain profound. I will work closely with Daresbury and the many tech organisations based there to make sure that any adverse effects of Brexit on the services developed and provided there will be minimised.

My party is supportive of a Brexit that puts jobs first and protects the rights of workers and consumers. It is therefore vital that the Government take the issue seriously, every step of the way. It is comforting that the hon. Lady obtained the debate, as that shows that some members of the governing party realise how crucial the issue is. I commend her on doing so, and hope that her colleagues in government will respond appropriately. The safety and quality of the services and products consumed by my constituents in Weaver Vale depend on it.

3.25 pm Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I want to echo the thanks that the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) expressed to the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for obtaining the debate. We must not underestimate, among the various aspects of Brexit, the importance of consumer protection. That vital matter is so wound around and ingrained into our daily lives that there is a danger that we may take the protections for granted but, as the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) has pointed out, that must not happen.

Currently, the rights of consumers are enshrined in EU law, so naturally there is bound to be concern and uncertainty about what will become of those rights and the responsibilities of businesses post-Brexit. We need clarity. At the moment, the UK has to comply with EU consumer policy and law, which is estimated to affect about 90 pieces of legislation, making a body of EU law designed to protect consumers. However, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill currently progressing through Parliament would repeal the European Communities Act 1972 and copy all EU legislation into UK law. The concern is that repeals, amendments and revisions could then be made to consumer law by any Government as they saw fit.

The lack of clarity and the uncertainty about Brexit is a cause of great concern, since we simply do not know what leaving the EU will mean for consumers or businesses. Will the UK stay in the single market? It looks as if that will not happen, so the rights of consumers in the UK will not be enhanced or kept pace with the rights of consumers in the EU. That could leave them exposed and lacking protection. Consumers are already feeling the Brexit pinch even though we have not yet left the EU. The devalued pound is pushing up inflation, and that alone has reduced purchasing power. Most consumers do not think too much about consumer protection until they need it. We need only look at the recent cancellation of Ryanair flights to find a good example of why consumers benefit from being part of the EU single market, and from sharing rights and protections across the EU. The personal example given by the hon. Member for Chelmsford brought that point home strongly. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) also touched on the issue, and outlined various sharp practices indulged in by some airlines.

Fundamentally, a lot of minds would be put at rest by an end to the uncertainty—by the knowledge on the part of consumers that the UK Government are willing absolutely to guarantee that consumer rights and protections will not be watered down post-Brexit, and to provide specific assurances of that in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. We need a cast-iron guarantee that current protections derived from EU legislation will remain in force. I fully understand the Government’s position that they do not want a “black hole in our statute book” and that they will convert EU laws into UK laws. However, no one can predict the longer-term impact of Brexit on consumers, since we do not know what the UK’s future relationship with the EU will look like, or even whether the UK will retain any access to the single market.

What can be said is that following our withdrawal from the European Union, EU consumer protection
legislation and that of the UK are likely to drift apart over time. I fully concur with the hon. Member for Bristol North West and the hon. Member for Chelmsford, who discussed the evolution of consumer law. Even if the UK adopts autonomously all EU legislation in the field of consumer protection, the interpretation of such legislation will vary, as UK courts will not be subordinate to the European Court of Justice, despite what the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said. We do not know what kind of divergence will take place.

Luke Graham: Does the hon. Lady recognise that the example that I used showed the UK going above and beyond what the EU was putting forward? If she would like to be “Stronger for Scotland”, perhaps she would begin by engaging positively with those details and looking at the opportunities we have, rather than always looking at the negative and trying to do the UK down.

Patricia Gibson: I listened very carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said, because I had this point in my head. He cannot negate the legitimate concerns that I have raised by simply saying, “We’ll always go one better.” I will give him a concrete example. There are fears in some quarters of a race to the bottom—for example, on food safety. The Secretary of State for International Trade has said that he is completely relaxed about a diminution in food safety. People cannot simply hide all the time behind the notion that the UK will always do something better than anything that is offered by the EU. That is asking us to take too much on trust.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will press on if the hon. Gentleman will permit me.

Consumers in the UK spend £1,160 billion each year on goods and services, and about £14.8 billion is the estimated value of consumer detriment that needs to be tackled by consumer protection bodies. That is with the current protections; diminution of any of those protections can only increase consumer detriment and undermine consumer confidence.

With increasingly complex and wide-ranging threats—in particular, a rise in e-commerce and scams—consumer protection needs to be as robust and match-fit for the modern world as it possibly can. The UK consumer cannot be left behind post-Brexit. I contend that remaining a member of the single market would guarantee that UK consumer protection law moved in line with that of the rest of the EU and would certainly reassure consumers and businesses that the current framework would continue to keep pace.

Regardless of what the future relations between the UK and the EU finally look like, the laws governing relations between consumers and businesses are vital to the future success of the UK as a whole. Consumers must have confidence in the purchases that they make, be confident about safety, and be confident of redress if anything goes wrong with the goods that they purchase; they must be confident that their rights as consumers are enforceable. My concern in relation to the uncertainty surrounding those rights, which will be subject to the whim of the Government of the day, is that the rights may be diluted or eroded over time as the EU moves ahead in this area, leaving the UK consumer rights agenda behind the curve, looking outdated and not fit for purpose in the modern world.

I hope that the Minister can provide cast-iron assurances that protecting and maintaining consumer rights is firmly on the Government’s agenda as Brexit unfolds, because consumers have a right to expect nothing less.

3.33 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on securing this important debate and particularly her eloquence and passion in introducing it. I also thank hon. Members present for their thoughtful and constructive contributions, which have vividly highlighted the importance of consumers to the UK economy, but also raised serious questions about what Brexit means for consumers and consumer protections.

Each month, consumers in the UK spend £100 billion in the economy, supporting local businesses, our manufacturing services and employees. Many of the consumer rights that we enjoy are embedded in EU legislation and institutional arrangements. I am disappointed by the Government’s approach to consumer concerns and by their refusal to set out the foundations of consumer protections post-Brexit.

The Government failed to mention consumer protection in their Brexit White Paper in February. They did not dedicate one of their 12 negotiating principles to consumers and consumer rights, and that barely had a mention in the Prime Minister’s 5,357-word speech in Florence. In addition, the Government continue to threaten that “no deal is better than a bad deal”, which could mean the UK crashing out of the EU and being forced to accept World Trade Organisation rules, which dictate tariffs on food of up to 62%—that is for beef—and on other goods such as cars. It will come as no shock that one third of consumers think that they will not be represented in the Brexit negotiations.

The Minister will say that the UK has played an important role in consumer protections, and I agree. The UK has often been a beacon for consumer protections in the EU and also globally, with countries across the world looking to us for our consumer protection laws, and we should be proud of that. However, consumers have been left with little assurance about whether, beyond Brexit, they will continue to enjoy the same rights and protections, or what the Government’s Brexit agenda will mean in this regard. Constituents across the country are asking, “Will it result in the UK being forced to accept chlorinated chicken from the US? What will be the overall impact on food and safety standards? What enforcement structures will be in place to support consumer protections?” There is much more they are asking about, as they do not have any clarity on those critical issues.

To begin with, there is deep concern about the current drafting of the Government’s key legislation, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. That Bill—in particular, clause 7—goes beyond the ability of Ministers to make technical changes and enters the murky waters of giving Ministers carte blanche to “prevent, remedy or mitigate” any “deficiency” in EU law, with no clear criteria about what that means. In effect, they can make whatever changes they see fit behind closed doors without
proper parliamentary scrutiny. If left unchanged, that could have a devastating impact on consumer protections, with Ministers effectively able to bring about wide-ranging changes on consumer issues such as food, product safety standards, approval systems and oversight of financial services. The uncertainty about the direction of consumer protections after Brexit leaves consumers in limbo about their rights and protections. This is not a question of simply copying and pasting the legislation from the EU into UK law; it is far more complicated with regard to how we apply the law.

Once we leave the EU, the Government maintain, we will be leaving all the EU bodies, so from the point of our departure, the consumer protection legislation of the EU and that of the UK are likely to drift apart, as interpretations of such legislation will differ. As a result, there is little clarity about questions of jurisdiction, conflict of laws and enforceability after Brexit, with the Government making no effort to clarify those issues.

For example, it is crucial that we maintain cross-border consumer protection so that consumers have the confidence and security that the products they are purchasing are safe. Consumers no longer operate within geographical boundaries, so a key tenet of the Brexit negotiations should be to maintain current protections but also to maintain co-operation agreements to maintain the existing rights when people are dealing with companies based in other EU member states.

As the head of consumer policy at Citizens Advice said in evidence to the Justice Sub-Committee of the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union,

“It is one thing to say that the rule of law applies, but if there is no right to compensation when travelling abroad, or purchasing from an EU trader, if the cross-border agreements are not there to back it up it is not worth as much as it would suggest.”

We have still not heard anything from the Government about what cross-border co-operation post-Brexit will look like. Will the Minister lay out the Government’s position? Furthermore, the current UK consumer protection regime is under severe strain after seven years of Tory budget cuts to local councils. For example, the current domestic products safety regime is not fit for purpose and needs urgent reform, yet at every opportunity the Government have dismissed calls for such changes. The Government’s working group report into product safety, published on 20 July, was disappointing and refused to acknowledge that real change was needed in the product safety regime. It offered no serious proposal to ensure that proper enforcement mechanisms were in place to remove faulty goods from the market. That raises serious questions about the robustness of current enforcement regimes and their ability to withstand the pressures from the weight of EU consumer rights laws, which would be transferred into UK law. We have had no clarity from the Government about what agencies they intend to establish, how much funding that will require, or what their roles and powers will be when breaches of consumer law are found.

Warm words will not cut it. We cannot trust this Government’s vague assurances that consumer protections will be safeguarded when they will not even properly engage with consumer groups. When I asked the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union how many times he had invited and met consumer groups to discuss negotiations on the UK leaving the EU and their implications for the consumer in the UK, his response was that Ministers and officials have met with consumer organisations such as Which?, MoneySavingExpert.com and Citizens Advice, and that they have plans to host a roundtable with consumer groups. All of those organisations have expressed frustration to me about the difference between engagement with businesses and with the consumer side, with the latter receiving very little attention from senior Government figures. Lip service has been paid to consumers, but there have not been any tangible outcomes in action from the Government, as no consumer and Secretary of State level roundtable or working group has been established. Finally, 16 months after the EU referendum we have yet to see a detailed plan about when this consumer roundtable, which the Secretary of State mentioned in his reply to my parliamentary question, will be held. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. I call the Minister to respond. If she could leave two to three minutes for the initiator of the debate to wind up, that would be great.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss the impact of the UK’s exit from the European Union on consumers.

First of all, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on tabling a debate on this very important issue. As the Prime Minister has made clear, most recently in her speech in Florence last month, the UK’s vote to leave the EU was not a vote to abandon our relationship with the EU. We want to maintain our deep and special partnership with it. We are leaving its institutions, but we remain a close ally, and we are committed to working with it to secure the best outcomes and to maintain strong consumer protections.

As hon. Members have made clear, consumers are crucial for UK prosperity. Household expenditure accounts for around 60% of our economy. In 2016, 83% of UK consumers used the internet to order goods or services, and 23% used it to order goods or services from another EU country. Engaged, confident consumers stimulate competition in markets and drive responsible business practices, benefiting businesses and consumers alike. This is crucial to ensuring that our economy works for everyone, which is a key objective of our industrial strategy, which will put the UK in a strong position for the future.

British people do not want shoddy goods or services and we will ensure consumers are protected from dangerous products and unfair trading practices. Making sure consumers are protected, wherever and however they purchase goods and services, is a top priority. As the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) pointed out, the UK has a strong history in its own right of protecting consumers. The Consumer Rights Act 2015 updated the laws governing every business selling directly to consumers and gave consumers clear rights. UK consumers have also relied on domestic laws in advance of EU legislation; for example, laws outlawed unreasonable contract terms almost 20 years before the EU legislated to ban them.
We have demonstrated our commitment to high standards for consumers by going beyond EU minimum standards in a number of other areas. For example, the UK led the way in protecting consumers purchasing digital content in the 2015 Act, before the Commission brought forward its proposals on digital content later that year. That point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford, who played a key role in the development of that consumer protection framework as chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection. Her scrutiny of EU proposals has been crucial to ensuring the law works for citizens and businesses alike. As she knows, the UK has worked closely with the European Commission, and in the Council, to develop a robust regime.

While we remain an EU member, we are continuing to fulfil our obligations fully and in good faith. We are setting the agenda where we can, to ensure that our legislation remains fit for purpose in the digital age. For example, the Digital Economy Act 2017 includes important measures to protect consumers and the UK’s position as a world leader in the digital economy. It includes protections against spam mail, and against children easily accessing online pornography, just as protections exist offline.

At EU level, we have secured general approaches in the Council on two pieces of consumer legislation this year: the digital content directive and the consumer protection co-operation regulation. Both files will increase consumers’ protection when buying online and set clear obligations for traders and businesses. Those are just two examples of how we have achieved robust protections. We will seek to continue working closely with the European Union on issues such as information sharing and enforcement co-operation.

We have a proud history of protecting consumers, but I agree with hon. Members that that should not make us complacent, following our exit from the European Union. I turn to our plans to protect UK consumers through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. The Bill will ensure that we exit the EU with maximum stability and provide certainty for businesses and consumers. It will ensure that UK consumer protections based on EU legislation are clearly retained, and that when a consumer buys from a trader based in the UK after exit, they can rely on the same rights that they currently enjoy. The way consumer protections apply internationally in the future is a matter for negotiations. However, our starting point is that we must continue to have effective protection for consumers, particularly those buying across borders, and we will work with the EU to secure the best possible deal for consumers in that respect.

Hon. Members have raised the question of how well we are working with stakeholders. I am disappointed to hear that, according to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), stakeholders have been frustrated in their desire for ministerial attention, and I can assure her that I will do my best to put that right. It is essential that we work with stakeholders to understand the impacts on consumers of the UK’s exit from the EU. As the hon. Lady pointed out, Ministers and officials have met a range of stakeholders, including Money Saving Expert, Citizens Advice and Which?, and in April 2017, when he was in post, Lord Bridges of Headley opened the National Consumer Federation’s consumer congress, which explored how we can secure the best outcomes for consumers after Brexit. I am pleased that Which? has been conducting an in-depth analysis of the range of impacts that EU exit will have on citizens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford mentioned some important areas for consumers, showing what a wide-ranging and integral issue this is. Flights, data roaming, insurance: it is vital that we have the complete picture of consumer concerns. That is why I agree that talking to consumer groups and businesses is vital. I have invited consumer groups and the devolved Administrations to meet me and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, so that we can hear their views and discuss key EU-exit issues. I look forward to continuing that engagement.

A number of other issues were raised concerning travel protections. Consumer protection for flights based on EU law will be retained in the EU withdrawal Bill, meaning that British consumers will be able to rely on the same rights after we leave the EU as they have now. On advance booking, it is a high priority to identify new arrangements at least 12 months before we formally leave the EU, to ensure legal certainty for consumers.

More broadly, maintaining liberal access to EU markets is a high priority for the Government. We recognise the importance of air services to the health of the economy. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) spoke with great knowledge about that subject and others relevant to this debate, reminding us that we must ensure that our post-Brexit consumer protection is fit for the future. I hope that his justifiable complaint against WOW Air is resolved.

The hon. Member for Makerfield raised a valid point about the future of our connection with the Rapex rapid alert system for dangerous non-food products. Intelligence sharing will remain vital post-Brexit, and we are working already with the EU to explore options for maintaining information sharing across borders. I agree with her that it is vital.

Various hon. Members mentioned product safety. Maintaining high standards for product safety is a high priority for the Government. I was asked specifically about the state of discussions on whether the British Standards Institution will continue to be involved in European standards setting. The BSI, the UK’s national standards body, is independent of Government, but we are working with it to ensure that our future relationship with the European standard-setting bodies continues to support a productive and open competitive business environment in the UK. They are assisting us as we roll out improvements to the product safety and withdrawal regime. The European standard-setting bodies, such as the European Committee for Standardisation, are not EU bodies, although they have a special status in the EU.

We remain committed to securing the best deal for UK citizens during the Brexit negotiations. That is as true for citizens as consumers as it is of any other aspect of their lives. As I said, the UK’s framework already sets high standards, and the EU withdrawal Bill will ensure that EU-derived protections are enshrined in existing UK law. Our aim is no reduction in protections for UK consumers after Brexit. It behoves us all, and certainly me while I am responsible for consumer protection, to work hard after EU exit to ensure that our consumer
Supported Housing Funding

3.57 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered future funding of supported housing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I am pleased to have secured this debate, which comes at an appropriate time, ahead of the Government’s publication of their response to the consultation that finished in February. I am aware that many colleagues want to take part in this debate. I shall do my best to accommodate them by taking interventions, but the pressure of time may mean that I have to disappoint some people, for which I apologise. Their presence, even if they do not get an opportunity to speak, says it all and sends out the right message. I confirm that I will support any application to the Backbench Business Committee for a longer debate.

**Mr Gary Streeter** (in the Chair): We now move on to our next debate, as I see that the protagonists are here. Would Members leaving please do so quietly? This is a half-hour debate, which seems to be extremely popular; fortunately, I am not chairing it. If colleagues will take their positions, we will move swiftly on.

**Vicky Ford**: I thank all colleagues who have taken part in this debate, and especially the Minister for answering it. The UK has a strong history of consumer protection, and I am delighted that she has committed to its continuation with no reduction in consumer protection. I am also delighted to hear that we will continue to share intelligence with our neighbours to ensure that consumers are protected, and that we are committed to very high standards.

In this debate, food and animal welfare standards in particular were raised numerous times. Those are, of course, competencies of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The first time this Parliament when the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs took questions from the House, I was honoured to be drawn to ask the first question. My question was whether we would maintain high standards for food and animal welfare post-Brexit; he said yes. It is a key part of consumer protection that we do not mislead our consumers. We should not mislead our voters. This Government are committed to maintaining high standards for consumer protection, animal welfare and food. I thank the Minister again for saying that those would remain priorities.

*Question put and agreed to.*

That this House has considered the effect of the UK leaving the EU on consumers and consumer protection.

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[Helen Hayes]
supported housing schemes have been put on hold. We are now more than 18 months on from the Government’s announcement that they would review funding arrangements for supported housing, but there is still no clarity or certainty. Does he join me—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. This is only a half-hour debate. Speeches may be made only by permission of the mover and the Minister, and interventions should be as short as possible.

Peter Aldous: The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) refers to the joint Select Committee report, which I will address in some length. It is part of the valuable work that Parliament has done.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I will be brief. I strongly support my hon. Friend’s leadership in this area. Does he agree that many faith-based organisations such as the YMCA, the Salvation Army and Emmaus need to know from the Minister that the system will be flexible enough to accommodate not just the need for shelter but the personal support that those organisations provide?

Peter Aldous: The three charities that my hon. Friend mentions have made that point to me. It is well made.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. He made the point that if supported housing becomes unsustainable—as many people say it already is—the cost of people going into residential care will be exponentially higher?

Peter Aldous: I agree. I hope to get to that point later.

Several hon. Members rose—

Peter Aldous: I will take one more intervention.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has secured this debate at a timely moment. Does he agree that the lack of clarity from the Government is leading to a lack of investment in supported housing? The longer that goes on, the bigger the crisis will be in the future.

Peter Aldous: There is a need for the Government to come forward with their proposals and plans. My point is that Government, Parliament and the sector, working together, all have a role in addressing this problem.

Let me move on. The vital role that supported housing plays is recognised by all, as is the need for a sustainable long-term solution, not a short-term sticking plaster. This is not a straightforward challenge; it is vital for Government, Parliament and all those involved in the sector to work together to put in place the right funding framework. There are encouraging signs that that is happening, but there is still a great deal of work to do.

The Government made the correct first move by carrying out the first evidence review for 20 years. Its findings were published on 21 November last year—the same day the Government launched their consultation on their preliminary proposals, setting up four task and finish groups to address specific challenges. The preliminary proposals were announced on 15 September 2016 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. In brief, they provide for people living in supported accommodation to have their core rent and service charges funded through housing benefit or universal credit up to the local housing allowance rate, and for costs above that rate to be distributed by local authorities from ring-fenced top-up funding provided by the Government.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentions the top-up on the local supported housing allowance. In Hull, that would be only £69.73—well below the needs of the organisations that the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) mentioned, such as Emmaus and the Salvation Army. My fear is that the money coming from the local authority will not be ring-fenced, sustained or available beyond a certain period. Those organisations are seriously at risk of falling dramatically below the level of funding that they need to keep going and stay open.

Peter Aldous: I hope I can answer the hon. Lady’s question straight away. Two concerns have been expressed to me about these proposals. First, is a one-size-fits-all LHA rate an appropriate starting point for a new funding mechanism? Secondly, providers are concerned that discretionary local top-ups do not provide the long-term stability needed for investment in new facilities.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Is it his understanding, as it is mine, that there is no correlation between LHA rates and the cost of providing supported housing across the country?

Peter Aldous: The right hon. Gentleman is spot on. There is a real worry that if we do not get this right, we will be creating a postcode lottery. The Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee published a unanimous joint report on 1 May in which they made three recommendations to complement the Government’s proposals. For the sake of timeliness, I will not outline them. I sense from the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who chairs the Communities and Local Government Committee, that we know the answer.

The work by Government and by Parliament’s Select Committees provides the foundation stone for a new long-term funding framework in which housing associations, charities and social enterprises can invest and take up the significant amount of funding that the Government have made available over the past five years.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the funding that was incorporated in the revenue support grant in 2011—taken away from a specific grant—has decreased by 53% in just one part of my constituency?

Peter Aldous: I was not aware of that, but it illustrates the concern that if we do not get this right, we could have a postcode lottery.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about the joint report by the two Select Committees, which were chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for...
Gloucester (Richard Graham). Since then, five housing associations, in a meeting chaired by Lord Richard Best, have come forward with a proposal for small regional variations in a specific grant with small top-ups that would meet the Select Committees’ proposals and cost the Government no more money. Should not the Government carefully consider that?

Peter Aldous: The hon. Gentleman is stealing my thunder, because I will come to that point in my recommendations, but I accept that he has done the hard graft and I am just a mouthpiece.

In the month before this debate, I received many representations that confirmed not only a willingness to engage with Government and Parliament but a worry that the proposals in their current form do not achieve their objective. I am happy to share all those representations with the Minister. The National Housing Federation, which represents English housing associations, has expressed concerns. The Chartered Institute of Housing has emphasised that the stakes are very high and that if we get this wrong, the implications for the public purse—not to mention life chances—are frightening.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): From my experience of the supported housing provided for constituents with autism and learning difficulties, I know that the LHA rent cap will mean that they simply will not be able to afford the support that they get in their current setting. They will end up in institutions or hospitals, which will actually cost the taxpayer far more money.

Peter Aldous: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

One Housing, a major provider of affordable housing in London and the south-east, is extremely concerned about the plan for a cap on the housing benefit to the level of the local housing allowance. It believes that it will have a dramatic impact on older people’s housing with care schemes and could reduce new supply. The Home Group, which is active in the north-east, Cornwall and East Anglia, including in Lowestoft in my constituency, is concerned that reliance on LHA rates could lead to a postcode lottery. It has put on hold the development of 1,842 units across the country while it awaits clarification on the proposed system.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): In my own constituency, one housing provider—Riverside—has informed me that all but one of its residents will be affected by these proposals, with the average resident’s rent at one project more than £100 per week above the proposed cap. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the proposed arbitrary cap will cause undue stress and anxiety to residents who may be forced to rely on the top-up funds?

Peter Aldous: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. It is quite clear from the feedback from organisations around the country such as Riverside—I have met Riverside staff—that there are serious problems.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The report that my hon. Friend referred to, which the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and I co-chaired, made recommendations that would deal with two or three of the comments that have been made by Members so far, particularly by having a new supported housing allowance with four relatively modestly differentiated regional bands, which would deal with the point about not needing local authority top-ups. Does he agree that, if the Government were to go ahead and accept those recommendations, it is also important that they hold to account housing associations and others to ensure that the provision is of a consistent quality throughout the country?

Peter Aldous: I agree with that point and I also thank my hon. Friend, because I am aware that he played a key role in the report from the joint Select Committees.

The Associated Retired Community Operators, which is the main trade body representing the retirement community sector, has also expressed concerns.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman also acknowledge the concerns of Community Housing Cymru, on behalf of housing associations in Wales, about the level of funding to be devolved under the new arrangements and the length of time that it is taking for the Green Paper to be published?

Peter Aldous: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. A lot of my emphasis has been on what is happening in England, but it is important that we remember the requirements of the devolved national Administrations; his point is well made in that respect.

Leonard Cheshire Disability has also expressed a concern to me. Rethink Mental Illness and Mencap have similar concerns. They highlight the important role played by supported housing in helping people affected by mental illness to recover, move on and live independently. They stress the need to think outside departmental silos and to engage with NHS England. It is worth bearing it in mind that a 30-day delayed discharge from a secure ward costs £16,890 and the same delay from an acute setting equates to £13,170. That compares with the cost of the most expensive forms of mental health supported housing, with added support costs, of around £2,000 per month.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): One of the providers in my constituency says that the shortfall in local health authority funding will be around £3.3 million, leaving the most vulnerable people without a roof over their heads. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is an intolerable situation for people to be in?

Peter Aldous: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It is quite clear from the research I have done that there are significant funding gaps. In fact, the YMCA, which is the largest charitable provider of supported housing for younger people, estimates that under the current arrangements there will be only 65% of the total funding that currently goes towards providing its 10,000 beds, which would leave the YMCA with an estimated £27 million funding gap.

Supported housing also has a vital role to play in ending rough sleeping, as St Mungo’s has highlighted in its “Save Hostels Rebuild Lives” report, which was also published last month. The Salvation Army has expressed concern that its 60 Lighthouses across the UK could be put at risk and it is calling on the Government to delay the introduction of any new funding system until 2022.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Bolton at Home supports 600 households, as well as providing
2,500 sheltered places. It says that the extra money it receives is used to provide support, assistance and advice to many elderly people who have a lot to deal with, such as mental health issues. In the long term, providing such housing saves loads of money as well. So, when money is being considered, Bolton at Home would like those things to be taken into account, too.

Peter Aldous: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention; she is illustrating that this is a nationwide problem.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab) rose—

Peter Aldous: I am conscious that my colleague to my right, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), wishes to intervene. I will allow him to intervene and then I will give way again to the hon. Gentleman.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I wanted to make a narrow point about Estuary Housing Association, as my constituency is affected by it. However, is he aware that, since he started his speech and said that half an hour for this debate was inadequate, about 60 or 70 Members have arrived, chairs have had to be brought in at the back and here on the Conservative Benches I am joined by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), the leader of the Liberal Democrats, or Labour as we now call them—[Interruption.]

Clearly, this issue has brought us all together. Can we say in the strongest possible terms to the Minister that really need to sort this out, and if it is not sorted out we need to come back to the House and go into a lot more detail in another debate, in which I would like to make a speech in favour of Estuary Housing Association?

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; his points are well made.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I have to say that the hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, is being interrupted by other Back Benchers. I know that the hon. Member will leave plenty of time for the Minister, because it is important that he replies on behalf of the Government.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful, Sir Edward, for that timely advice. I will now move on to my three suggestions for ways forward.

My first proposal is that the Government should give full and serious consideration to adopting the recommendations made by the Communities and Local Government and the Work and Pensions joint Select Committee; it has made its case well. Under the auspices of Lord Best, Housing and Care 21, Riverside, the Home Group and Hanover Housing have analysed data from approximately 43,000 supported housing and older people’s tenancies across the UK, and concluded that a supported housing allowance proposal represents a viable and workable approach. Although I recognise that the Government have to study that analysis closely, this proposal could be a sensible way forward.

Secondly, it is important that the Government examine very closely the impact of universal credit on the supported housing sector, particularly as the rollout is due to be ramped up in the next few weeks. Universal credit in its current form is in many respects incompatible with supported housing. The local housing allowance rate was designed for the private rental sector and bears no relation to costs in the supported housing sector. It also introduces levels of variation in funding through the benefits system across the country, which are greater than the variation in costs of delivering supported housing. This could leave parts of the country particularly exposed and it could skew development towards areas with higher funding rather than highest need.

Thirdly, there is a need for the Government to provide a revised timetable for working up the new funding framework with providers, road-testing it, carrying out an impact assessment and then introducing it. The general election has thrown the previous timetable somewhat off course. I anticipate that the Minister will advise us as to when the Government will respond to the consultation that closed in February, and whether they are still intending to introduce the new system on 1 April 2019. An early statement is required to address the concerns that have outlined, which have been echoed all across the Chamber, and to set out a clear direction of travel.

It would be helpful to receive some indication as to whether a pilot or a shadow year—as the Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), suggested when she was Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—might also be considered.

In conclusion, Sir Edward, I am grateful to you for bearing with me. It is important that we get this matter right, as the lives of many vulnerable members of society depend on it. I acknowledge that this is not a straightforward task, but I sense that, by working together, a partnership of Government, Parliament and the supported housing sector can put in place a long-lasting framework that will provide dignity, peace of mind and hope to residents. They deserve no less.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I am grateful, Sir Edward, for the opportunity to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I will begin my response to the debate by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this important debate and for granting me the opportunity to outline the significance that the Government attach to supported housing. I know that he has been following the issue extremely closely and has been a great advocate for the sector and the people it supports. The importance of supported housing to right hon. and hon. Members is demonstrated by the number of them here in the Chamber today.

Supported housing plays an invaluable role in our society, helping some of our country’s most vulnerable people to live as independently as possible. Supported housing serves as an important lifeline for vulnerable older people, individuals with learning disabilities and physical impairments, those at risk of domestic abuse and many other vulnerable people. It is also an investment—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney—that brings savings to other parts of the
public sector, such as health and social care. It is essential, therefore, that we introduce the funding model for supported housing and make sure that it is on a sustainable footing, ensuring that it works for providers, commissioners and vulnerable tenants, as well as for the taxpayer.

Peter Kyle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will make some more progress and then, bearing in mind that I do not have long to respond, I will see how many interventions I can take.

We recognise the value of local strategic planning, partnership working, commissioning and oversight, and we are keen to encourage local government, providers of supported housing and the wider public sector to continue to develop a joined-up, strategic, holistic approach with a greater local focus very much on outcomes, oversight and value for money.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney knows, our consultation on supported housing concluded earlier this year. We welcomed all the responses, of which there was a significant number—592—and we have been careful in taking stock of the views from the sector, local government, other stakeholders and Members of this House. We also welcomed the joint Committee inquiry, and its subsequent report, into the future funding of supported housing, and we have been considering its recommendations. I thank Members who served on that Committee for their work and their input into the process.

Let me assure the House that we have been taking all of this thoughtful and reflective input into account as we continue to develop our plans. This matter is a priority for the Government, and we will announce the next steps shortly—later this autumn. I believe that we are keen to encourage local government, providers of supported housing and the wider public sector to continue to develop a joined-up, strategic, holistic approach with a greater local focus very much on outcomes, oversight and value for money.

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Let me assure the House that we have been taking all of this thoughtful and reflective input into account as we continue to develop our plans. This matter is a priority for the Government, and we will announce the next steps shortly—later this autumn. I believe that when those proposals are introduced, they will show that we have listened and have understood the important issues at hand and the important situation. What is at stake is helping and supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. I want to place on record the first-rate the opening speech by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), was. The Minister mentioned sustainable funding. If such funding is set at a very low level, does he not accept what the YMCA, whose supported housing I have visited in my constituency, believes? That organisation believes that reform could lead to a two-thirds reduction in its funding, and that, although it might be secure, it would be completely unsustainable and would lead to destitution for the people who need this kind of supported living the most.

Mr Jones: I entirely agree that we need to ensure that this is a sustainable source of funding, on which the YMCA and many other organisations that provide support and assistance to the most vulnerable in our society can rely to deliver their services. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney mentioned short-term accommodation, and I will address that very point in a moment.

We want the design of the reformed funding model to be flexible. We also want it to be responsive enough to meet the various demands placed on it by a diverse sector and client base. We have therefore been working closely across Government to understand and consider the needs of individuals who require long-term supported accommodation, such as people with learning disabilities, physical and sensory disabilities and mental health problems, and disabled older people. That is why we want to commit to supporting the most vulnerable in our society with £400 million of capital funding to deliver new specialist affordable homes, particularly for the elderly and people with learning disabilities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Jones: I will take just two more interventions so that I can then respond to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister. I have counted 53 Members in the Chamber today, not including the Minister and his Parliamentary Private Secretary. That number is unprecedented, in my experience, for a half-hour debate. The Minister talks about the “we” in Government. Will he press that fact, and the concern here in this room, to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Chancellor? Will he also press the point that the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) made, that there is a real job for Parliament, the sector and the Government to find—together—a good solution for the long term? Will he now get the Government to step up to do just that?

Mr Jones: I do not disagree with the right hon. Gentleman’s sentiment, but I can assure him that we are working across government, across the Departments that he mentions, because we want a sustainable funding solution to support the extremely vulnerable groups we all want to see supported in our society.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney on securing the debate and on his excellent opening remarks. Will the Minister confirm that he has read the report from Riverside, which was mentioned earlier, which builds on the Select Committees’ recommendations about a banded scheme and seems to solve the problem without it costing the Government extra money?

Mr Jones: Indeed I have, and I have met Riverside and a whole host of providers in the sector, including last week at the Conservative party conference, where I was involved in a roundtable event held by Reform. Although there were not as many seats around the table as we have here, there was a waiting list, which demonstrates the importance of the issue and of the Government’s getting it right.

I would now like to pick up the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney made. Both he and other Members mentioned the work done by Lord Best and my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), and I have had sight of their proposal, which is about developing a bespoke supported housing allowance. I am most grateful for their recommendations and for the suggestion about maintaining funding from the welfare system and testing and developing a banding system to provide cost controls that reflect the costs of provision in a particular area and for a particular type of supported housing. That is something we are considering very carefully.
Richard Graham: Will the Minister say something about the timing of the Government response?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question from a sedentary position. In relation to our response to the consultation, the issue of timing is not lost on us and we expect to come forward with further proposals during the autumn.

Mr Betts: Sure.

Mr Jones: I can assure the Chairman of the Select Committee of that.

In relation to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney made about piloting and further consultations, we will work closely with the sector and listen to what is being said during consultation. There may well be a case for testing proposals in some way, and we expect to set out further details about how we will go about introducing our proposals. What I underline, again, is that we are listening to the sector.

Sir Edward, I think you are going to pull me up very soon for running out of time, so I would just like to reassure right hon. and hon. Members that the Government have considered the consultation very carefully and have considered the proposals—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
by 56% between 2010 and 2020, and it has to find a further £17 million in cuts over the current spending review period. That means that both authorities have been forced either to cut back completely or to charge schools for services and support that used to be provided for free. Unsurprisingly, schools have generally not budgeted for those charges in advance.

On top of those challenges, which were already causing headteachers to worry, there are the Government’s changes to the national funding formula. Although they have the stated aim of making funding fairer—I am sure the Minister will explain how they do that when he gets his chance to speak—they seem to disadvantage the vast majority of schools in my constituency.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. As she is outlining, this is a funding attack on schools not just in south Liverpool, but across our city and beyond. The education unions have calculated that, after the last revision of the funding formula and the extra money announced before recess, my constituency alone will lose £4 million, or £300 per pupil, by 2020. I hope she will push the Minister for a response to that.

Maria Eagle: I will indeed—and I think my hon. Friend has himself just pushed the Minister for a response. I am sure the Minister will want to make some points in reply and set out his understanding of the impact of the national funding formula, which seems not to advantage schools in our area as much as I would like.

Liverpool City Council told me that, according to its calculations, the Garston and Halewood constituency will lose £390 per pupil—a cut of more than £4.5 million between 2015 and 2020—which is not dissimilar to what my hon. Friend said is happening in his area. That is the equivalent of a cut of 125 teaching jobs. The local authority told me that across Liverpool as a whole the loss is £487 per pupil, or a 9% cut overall, and a cut of almost £28.5 million between 2015 and 2020, equivalent to 778 teaching jobs.

The Minister may well say that the revisions that were made to the national funding formula in July and September, with the finding of savings from his Department and the raiding of various capital budgets for £1.3 billion, will make a difference to that, but many of the schools in my constituency have reported to me that they have or are planning to cut teaching and support staff posts. One headteacher of a local primary school, which the Minister’s letter tells me will see an increase of 0.9%, told me that

“the current staffing levels are unsustainable due to the differentials between school income and school expenditure on staff... The Governors are currently planning a staffing review to identify how we can reduce staffing costs by making teachers and teaching assistants redundant. We need to lose three teachers by 2019 if we are to manage our school budget without going into deficit. This will mean we will not have a qualified teacher in each class, which by law we must have. We are looking ahead at troubled times in schools.”

That is not the only school to have told me it is planning staffing reductions. One school, which has already seen a significant cut in teaching and support staff and a narrowing of the breadth of its curriculum as a result, is now contemplating further reductions to the curriculum, to pastoral staffing and to the length of the school day and the school week.

Some of my schools have been hit particularly hard, according to Liverpool City Council figures. Springwood Heath Primary School in Allerton is a unique school. It is a mainstream primary with enhanced provision places, which integrates children with significant physical and medical needs into its community. The city council projects that it will lose more than £719 per pupil—a 14% cut. Although that may be ameliorated by the changes to the national funding formula, which the Minister will no doubt tell us about later, it is already losing teachers and support staff, and to lose support staff at Springwood Heath is to put at risk the ability of some pupils to continue to attend because they depend on those support staff, who enable them to attend that mainstream school. That would be a particular concern to me. It might be said, “Well, so you lose a few support staff,” but if those staff are ensuring that severely disabled children can attend a mainstream school, that is more than simply losing support staff; it is losing a richness and quality of education that no other school offers. If the Minister comes to Liverpool, which I invite him to do, I hope he visits Springwood Heath Primary School. Then he could tell me whether in his experience there is another school like it. I am not sure that there is.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): A few moments ago my hon. Friend made the point that the evidence is that the funding formula adjustments announced in the summer have not really resolved the problems in south Liverpool. As she is aware, my information is that all bar three of the schools in Knowsley—so this affects her constituency as well—will have either no change or further reduction to their funding. The sort of situations that she described in that one important school will then be played out across Knowsley, to the detriment of the education of the children concerned.

Maria Eagle: My right hon. Friend is correct. He and I, as representatives of the borough, know that there is an issue of attainment in Knowsley schools. It is a long-standing one, which we continue to try to tackle, as Governments of all stripes have tried to do. It is certainly not ameliorated and improved by taking money away from schools. That will just deepen and worsen the attainment gap that is already there. If that were to happen, it would be a very great worry.

Liverpool City Council figures also tell me that Stockton Wood Primary School in Speke, one of the most deprived wards in the country, will lose £659 per pupil, which is a 13% cut; Garston Church of England Primary School will lose £616 per pupil, a 12% cut; and Childwall Valley Primary School, in Belle Vale, will lose 12% or £671 per pupil.

Lest the Minister believe that only schools in the most deprived wards are being hit, I can tell him that St Julie’s Catholic High School in Woolton is facing a £555 per pupil cut, which is a 10% cut, and St Francis Xavier’s College—the school that first contacted me to express worries and about which I wrote to his Department in February—is facing a cut of £508 per pupil, or 10%. Given that the school told me at the time that its financial situation was unsustainable and that it has made 13 staff redundant, with a further six posts unfilled, I wonder what the Minister thinks will be the impact on it of the revision to the national funding formula. The revised figures from the National Education Union suggest that SFX will still lose 5% per pupil. His letter
tells me that the school will have an increase, but since
the new figures were produced no one has told
me—certainly not the headteacher, to whom I have
spoken—that it will be able to avoid painful decisions
about what to do in respect of its provision.

I note that the Minister sent me a letter—as I am sure
de did to many other Members—dated 14 September
about the impact of his revisions to the national funding
formula on schools in my constituency. For the life of
me, I cannot work out how he has come to the conclusion
that he came to, which is that every school on the list
will have an increase in its funding. The Minister’s letter
refers to “illustrative figures”, stressing that they are
“not actual allocations”, which might provide some clue
to what is going on. There is also an assumption
that the new formula is being implemented in full this
financial year, without any transition. The baseline
figure is from a year subsequent to the one in which the
£2.7 billion cuts were implemented, so it is not clear
how realistic the figures produced are. All that sounds
like a way of saying that the table the Minister has
produced contains fantasy figures that bear no relation
to what is happening, and that those figures are all
mysteriously going up, even though schools and
headteachers still tell me that they are facing budget
shortfalls that necessitate their cutting teachers and
having to consider other painful decisions in order to
balance their budgets.

The National Education Union has revised its own
list of the impact of the new funding formula to take
into account the extra, recycled £1.3 billion of Department
for Education money that the Secretary of State announced
in July she had found and expanded upon in her statement
in September. The NEU figures at least have the merit
of setting out their methodology in full: based on the
core schools budget, which represents 75% of school
spending, and using block funding allocations for 2015-16
as the baseline, the NEU figures compare the 2019-20
amounts for schools in the Government’s NFF document,
apply the Office for Budget Responsibility estimate for
inflation, and take pupil numbers from the most up-to-date
school census. On that basis, 29 of the 31 schools in my
constituency lose out, some seeing a cut of up to
12% and many of those with the highest number of
pupils receiving free school meals losing the most.

To my mind, that is one of the most pernicious effects
of the Government’s new way of funding schools. How
can it be right that Middleton Community Primary
School, where 68% of pupils are entitled to free school
meals, is set to lose £558 per pupil, a cut of 10%, and
that even Enterprise South Liverpool Academy, where
81% of pupils are entitled to free school meals, is losing
£61 per pupil, a cut of 1%? I do not call that fair funding;
I call that hitting the most deprived communities
the hardest.

Providing a good and rounded education for all
citizens is one of our society’s greatest benefits and
achievements. It also has the merit of being a great
leveller, enabling people to make their way in life, to
succeed and to make the most effective contribution
they possibly can to our society, no matter what the
circumstances of their birth. I want all my constituents
to be able to benefit from an excellent education. That
must start, however, by enabling those born with
disadvantages to overcome them and to flourish.

In many of the schools I visit in my constituency, I
see teachers and staff striving to deliver those life chances
to children and young people who face significant barriers
to learning. However, I increasingly see disadvantage
being reinforced rather than eliminated. That is being
exacerbated by the policies being implemented by this
Government. In the Knowsley Metropolitan Borough
Council area no academic A-level provision is now
available—none. That has happened because of funding
arrangements that effectively require the same density
of pupils who want to study academic A-levels in the
most deprived areas as in the most affluent, when in
reality there are likely to be fewer, at least until the
attainment gap is closed, which in practice has proven
stubbornly difficult to achieve.

Last year the last sixth form providing academic
A-levels in the borough—Halewood Academy in my
constituency—was closed because the school could not
attract enough pupils to make it pay at a time when the
forced academisation of the school meant that it had to
balance its budget. I do not blame the headteacher or
the governors for what happened, and I am glad that
the academic achievements of the school improved this
year—indeed, of course, at A-level—but it is not
right to make it harder for pupils from deprived areas to
get easy access, in their local communities, to the
opportunities that studying A-level subjects provide.

The barriers to success are already formidable, without
making pupils travel out of area when they are less able
do so because of their families’ financial circumstances.
In addition, I do not think it right that multi-academy
trusts, all based and run from outside Knowsley MBC’s
area, should be able in effect to choose which local
pupils they wish to offer opportunities to with no
accountability to local communities.

Mr Howarth: My hon. Friend is generous in giving
way again. She, my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens
South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and I have been
pressing the Government to provide support for sixth-form
A-level provision in the borough. Does she agree that if
we do not get that, the effect on other secondary schools
will also be detrimental?

Maria Eagle: I believe it will be—my right hon.
Friend is correct. That is essential. I hope that we can
make a difference and that the Government will come
through to help us get academic A-level provision back
in the borough, because if that does not happen, in due
course—this will not take long—young families will not
locate themselves in Knowsley. They will not think it is
a place to bring up their kids unless there is a good
chance of their staying in a school all the way through
to do their A-levels and to go on to university from
there.

Where is the accountability to local parents and
communities in the existing arrangement? Knowsley no
longer has any community secondary schools and all
the academies are controlled by different MATs, all
based outside the borough. The local council still has
the obligation to provide for education in its area, but it
has no levers whatever to pull to affect the provision,
except for persuasion. The multi-academy trusts are all
controlled elsewhere and will make decisions based on
factors that may or may not matter to Knowsley
communities but will certainly relate to the financial
circumstances of their own organisations. In addition,
when the council controlled schools, local people could vote out their councillors if they did not like developments. Now, there is no way for them to affect provision. The MATs have no accountability to the communities whose future they influence so greatly.

I worry that the school provision and funding structure developed by the Government can soon go wrong in areas where there is an attainment issue and can be hard to put right. I worry that provision is now being determined by financial considerations above all else. Communities such as those in my constituency need greater local provision to enable everyone to reach their potential, but that provision is in retreat. I worry that the phenomenon of the loss of sixth forms and academic A-level provision in Knowsley could continue to spread, and that young people soon will have less chance to go down that route if they do not live in a more affluent area that can easily meet the increasingly high numbers of pupils needed to provide academic A-levels.

I would like the Minister to assure me that he is aware of those problems and is determined to reverse those trends, so that young people from the communities of south Liverpool have no fewer chances to reach their potential than those who come from more advantaged areas. If he cannot do so, our education system will have lost one of its great features: the ability to facilitate social mobility and life chances for those whose family circumstances may not give them such opportunities. We will all be poorer for that.

4.51 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on her excellent and powerful speech and on bringing this important issue to the House. I echo what she said about the risks to schools in Liverpool. On Saturday, we had a demonstration against school cuts in Liverpool, organised by Liverpool City Council cabinet member Nick Small, at which the shadow Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), spoke. The support there demonstrated the powerful sense in Liverpool that education is a priority for communities and families and that there is real concern about the impact of the proposed funding formula on Liverpool schools.

Let me talk about some of the schools in my constituency. According to schoolcuts.org, Croxteth Community Primary School stands to lose more than £100,000—£381 per pupil. Monksdown Primary School in Norris Green stands to lose £354 per pupil. St Edward’s College, the Walton (Dan Carden), stands to lose more than £200,000. St John Bosco, a fantastic school in Croxteth, which the Minister visited with me a few years ago, stands to lose £354 per pupil. Monksdown Primary School in Norris Green stands to lose more than £100,000—£381 per pupil. St Edward’s College, the Walton (Dan Carden), stands to lose more than £200,000. St John Bosco, a fantastic school in Croxteth, which the Minister visited with me a few years ago, stands to lose £354 per pupil. Monksdown Primary School in Norris Green stands to lose more than £100,000—£381 per pupil. St John Bosco, a fantastic school in Croxteth, which the Minister visited with me a few years ago, stands to lose £354 per pupil. Monksdown Primary School in Norris Green stands to lose more than £100,000—£381 per pupil. St John Bosco, a fantastic school in Croxteth, which the Minister visited with me a few years ago, stands to lose £354 per pupil. Monksdown Primary School in Norris Green stands to lose more than £100,000—£381 per pupil. St John Bosco, a fantastic school in Croxteth, which the Minister visited with me a few years ago, stands to lose £354 per pupil.

According to schoolcuts.org, Croxteth Community Primary School stands to lose more than £100,000—£381 per pupil. Monksdown Primary School in Norris Green stands to lose £354 per pupil. St Edward’s College, the alma mater of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), stands to lose more than £200,000. St John Bosco, a fantastic school in Croxteth, which the Minister visited with me a few years ago, stands to lose more than £200,000. It is vital that factors such as deprivation, pupil mobility and prior attainment are given due weight when a national funding formula is devised. If they are not, schools in communities such as the one that my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood and I serve in Liverpool risk losing out, which may set back the work that those schools do to improve standards.

Let me raise a separate issue, which has been raised before in this Chamber: the future of our nursery schools. Nursery schools play a critical role in early years. I am proud to have two nursery schools in constituency: East Prescot Road and Ellergreen. They are both rated outstanding by Ofsted, as are the majority of nursery schools across the country. Last month, a Sutton Trust report stated that the Government were too focused on providing quantity over quality in early years, and that social mobility will not improve because things are being implemented at the expense of quality early years education for the most disadvantaged. Nursery schools are the very best of that quality early years education. I hope that the Minister will update us on the Government’s plans for the funding of nursery schools, because that is an important part of the picture, alongside the issues that my hon. Friend rightly raised about the impact of the national funding formula.

Finally, funding is crucial, but high levels of funding—although necessary—are not sufficient to deliver improvement. That is why schools, the local authority and others in Liverpool have come together to launch the Liverpool promise, which is about how we can collaborate to raise standards. An ambition of the Liverpool promise is to provide world-class education and to improve rapidly against national performance indicators. We know, Liverpool schools know and the local authority knows that we need further improvement. A lot of work needs to be done. If we are to deliver that improvement, we need to share best practice and collaborate, and we need to understand why some schools do better than others in the basics of literacy and numeracy. That shared learning and collaboration is at the heart of why we launched the Liverpool promise.

None of us would ever argue that funding is the only solution to the challenges in our education system, but I absolutely concur with my hon. Friend’s powerful point that we need reliability of funding to ensure that schools across Liverpool and, indeed, other core cities are equipped to meet future challenges. I ask the Minister to give some reassurance that the factors that I have described—deprivation, pupil mobility and prior attainment—will feature in the finally agreed funding formula. If they are given due weight, the funding formula may not have the impact on Liverpool schools that we fear it will if it remains as proposed.

4.56 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this debate, and on her excellent speech. There is such a widespread onslaught on public services that it is often difficult to know which area to focus on, but it is very important that we look at education, because it is about giving young people opportunities. It matters particularly in areas of high deprivation, some of which are in my constituency.

The picture that my hon. Friend painted is reflected in my constituency, where the whole sector—nurseries, primary schools, secondary schools and the City of Liverpool College—is suffering in the same way. It is a great reflection of the ability and commitment of Liverpool City Council that, despite a 68% cut in its overall funding, it has managed to protect some of the education sector. For example, all the nursery schools have been protected, the council has run an extensive and important reading programme, and when the Government cut their building programme, the council raised its own funds to build and expand
schools. Indeed, only last week, I was in an extension to Bellerive FCJ Catholic College, where excellent work is being done.

I would like to add my concerns about the impact of the national funding formula on schools in my constituency. The Government claimed originally that the formula meant that areas such as Liverpool would not lose out, and that it was all about giving more help to more deprived areas. That fallacy was exposed, and the Government had to look again at the situation. Although the new formula that they have brought forward is certainly not as bad as the previous one, it does not solve the problems. Indeed, at this very moment, Liverpool City Council is analysing what it really means.

The figures that have been put forward will mean cuts in many schools, and the extent of those cuts are still being looked at. The figures that were advocated and that are now proposed are in fact for only two years; we simply do not know what will happen beyond those two years. Money will be sent away from Liverpool to more prosperous areas of the country, and the money to deal with that will come from existing budgets, including the capital budget and others that have not yet been defined. We simply do not know what impact the formula will have on Liverpool’s schools, but we suspect that it will mean even more cuts.

We have had enough cuts in education; we do not want more. Education is about giving people the best chance for the future. I call on the Minister to spell out clearly what the national funding formula will mean for Liverpool’s schools, including those in my constituency, and to give a commitment that there will be no real-terms funding cuts to essential education services. We owe that to the young people in our areas.

4.59 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this important debate and setting out all the issues that our constituents face. I do not believe there is any issue more vital to the future of children in south Liverpool and constituencies such as mine than the quality of their education.

I hope we all understand that a good education, delivered by professional teachers and support staff in a safe, nurturing environment, is the key to future success and fulfilment. Education builds the ladder out of poverty and disadvantage. It provides the doorway to job opportunities, further education and training, and it is the window to a world of opportunities. The Prime Minister talks about a British dream in which each generation does better than the last; surely a decent education is vital to that, so why in our constituencies in Liverpool and constituencies such as mine does the quality of their education differ?

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In preparing for the debate, I spoke to all my primary and secondary schools about their experiences, and it is fair to say that I was deluged by responses. I visit all my schools weekly, but I was keen to get a snapshot of their current experience. The picture painted for me was alarming and distressing. I want to reflect on the responses I received from the leaders, the headteachers in my constituency. One primary school head wrote:

“My overriding concern talking to colleagues is that the education system is at breaking point. On an increasing number of occasions, it feels like we are the ‘last man standing’ when it comes to dealing with ever more complex social issues. I worry greatly that the whole system is in danger of collapse in the near future.”

Another primary head said:

“We are continually having additional services placed as the responsibility of the school with no extra funding or staff to oversee this…The teaching profession is at an all-time low.”

A third headteacher—this time of a secondary school—said:

“My school has been through two restructurings in recent years as a direct result of real-term budget cuts: in 2015 when 12 posts were cut and in 2017 when three posts were cut. We have had to cut both teaching posts and pastoral posts. We have one part-time counsellor in school whereas previously we had two. It is fair to say that we have no further capacity for reducing the number of teachers or the number of support staff without significantly compromising the education of the young people.”

Reflecting on all those contributions—I have many more—I find them to be incredibly stark representations, particularly on World Mental Health Day.

Our schools are contending with increased numbers of children who are suffering from mental health conditions. We heard from the Children’s Commissioner only yesterday about the experience of our young people. Our schools are really struggling. Many of us here attended a meeting of the Liverpool Association of Secondary Headteachers to hear at first hand their collective experience of trying to do the best by their students, but struggling to ensure that they are cared for and looked after. That is surely the point: the cuts are harming our children’s education in real and significant ways.

I will reflect briefly on points raised by two of my schools, one primary and one secondary, about the impact of the cuts so far—I am not touching on the cuts to come—on both the breadth of curriculum and the experience of our young people. One of my primary schools has had to cut support staff hours to basic levels, which has impacted on the availability of after-school clubs and is having a significant impact on the variety of opportunities and the curriculum for our young people. Music lessons have been cut for years 5 and 6. We often talk in the House about the value of creative education and music, but in my primary schools, that provision is being cut altogether. A native French speaker who supported children in years 3 to 6 with weekly lessons has also been cut. It is all very well teaching French, but we all benefit from hearing from someone who speaks it as their native language.

One of my secondary schools has cut four A-levels, one of which is computing. As a woman who is a keen advocate for improving access to science, technology, engineering and maths, I find that disheartening. I do not have the other subjects in front of me; I am sure they are equally important, but I am particularly concerned about computing. Equally, there has been a cut in posts at that school, which is one of the best secondary schools in the country. I will not name it—I gave my schools the opportunity to speak openly, but they were concerned that their representations might affect them in the future if they were named—but it has had to cut 4.5 teachers since 2015, impacting on young people’s education.

We have heard many representations about the impact of the Government’s plans and the proposed cuts to education, which in Liverpool will equate to £28 million.
That is £488 per student. I will not run through the cuts to each of my schools, but they are significant and very, very worrying. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood outlined, those figures do not include the cuts to our local authority, which have been significant and had a massive impact on the additional services that we know make a difference, particularly in supporting schools in our area. In total, just under 4,000 primary schoolchildren in Liverpool are being taught in large classes of over 30, which is a rise of 60% since 2011. I could refer to many other elements.

That is the real picture of education in Britain today. We are seeing growing class sizes, fewer teachers, and fewer subjects on offer at A-level. Also, we are not seeing the right equipment in schools. Unbelievably, one school essentially had to sell all its sensory room equipment because it needed to raise funds. We are seeing more children taught by unqualified teachers, often—I pointed to the figures—in packed classrooms. That is what has happened to date; going forward, the national funding formula will take even more money away from the schools that need it the most—our schools are in constituencies with some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country. That is the essence of the debate.

We have seen the human cost of other Government policies in our constituencies. The bedroom tax comes to mind, and we are discussing universal credit at the moment. The national funding formula has the potential to be the latest addition to that list. We have only one chance to educate our children. My message to the Minister is: it is not too late to listen to the teachers, parents and children in our constituencies, and think again to ensure that all children in our area—and across the country—have the opportunities that will serve them well into the future.

5.7 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this timely debate and standing up for schools in Liverpool. If the Minister feels uncomfortable about the number of Labour MPs facing him, he should remember that I am a Mancunian and so just as uncomfortable.

My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about the problems facing not just south Liverpool but all schools. I also want to congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on his excellent speech. Sir Michael Wilshaw, the former chief inspector, talked about politicians standing up for schools in their area and raising standards, and my hon. Friend has admirably led the “Liverpool challenge” over the past couple of years by chairing that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) spoke passionately about education being children’s best chance in life. Those of us who represent working-class constituencies like we do know that it is the only silver bullet for advancement there is. If we deny children that, we are all worse off for it. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) talked about testimony from a school after school and the impact that cuts are having. She has led in the House admirably on issues around mental health; nobody has done more on that.

There was an intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who stood up for schools in Knowsley and its A-level provision, which is a long-running sore that was also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood. We want to see that addressed. There was also an intervention from the Member for Anfield—sorry, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). I will be keeping half an eye on the game on Saturday, even though I come from the blue half of Manchester. I welcome him to his place and also welcome his intervention.

There has been a huge, high-profile campaign by parents, trade unions, teachers and support staff to ensure that our schools are properly funded, yet the Secretary of State has made another concession on the Government’s school funding policy and found £1.3 billion over the next two years from other parts of the Department’s education budget, because unfortunately she lost her fight with the Chancellor. However, schools, teachers, parents and pupils have yet to crack open the champagne. With the Secretary of State having sneaked out her backdoor the day before recess, we have now had the opportunity to examine the detail of her announcement. The £1.3 billion that she announced is nowhere near enough to reverse the £2.8 billion of cuts that schools have suffered since 2015, and the cuts that they are having to implement now because the Government keep pushing back the funding formula and the announcement on the new budget. We also know that none of the money announced so far is actually new money for education. Will the Minister therefore confirm today, in the interests of transparency and accountability, where he plans to cut funding from other areas to fill the black hole that the Secretary of State created just before the recess?

The overall level of education funding is totally inadequate, as has been marvellously and articulately explained by Opposition Members. The devastating cuts to our schools, sixth forms and colleges just carry on and on, and the impact of the real-terms cuts to funding are there for all to see. Schools are having to cut subjects. Children are being taught in super-sized classes. Schools are cutting staff at a time when they are facing a teacher recruitment crisis, with more than 24,000 unqualified teachers working in our state sector since the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), the former Education Secretary, stopped the rule that school teachers must be qualified. We now require qualified teachers only across the local education authority system, not in free schools and the multi-academy trusts. Schools also have to support vulnerable children, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree, and there is not enough special educational needs provision. The strain is there to see.

There are two issues I will push on: the teacher recruitment and retention crisis, and the impact of the cuts on class sizes. It is widely accepted that falling pay levels and increased workload pressures for teachers have been causing problems in teacher recruitment and retention, and school cuts are making matters worse. The National Audit Office, for instance, has found that teacher recruitment is not keeping up. Teacher shortages are reaching crisis point, and the subjects that are vital to our country’s future, such as science and computing, are hardest hit.
What is interesting about the statistics—I will speak more about this on behalf of the shadow education team over the autumn—is that the Government have taken 10,000 to 15,000 teaching posts out of the system since 2010, yet we are still failing to recruit enough teachers. What does that say for the management of the system? As a former teacher, I know that there is no greater investment that Government can make in education than investment in the quality of the teaching. Up to 14,000 classrooms could be without a permanent teacher in this academic year, affecting around 300,000 pupils nationally. Let me get the statistics right: vacant teaching posts have increased by 24% over the past two years, with 9% more teaching vacancies this September than in the same month in 2016. Two thirds of teachers are looking to leave their current role within the next three years. Since 2011—on this Government’s watch—one quarter to one third of all teachers have left the profession since training.

Behind every good teacher is a network of teaching assistants, support staff, assistants, lunchtime organisers and more. They make the school run smoothly, giving teachers space and time for their pupils and lessons. However, the cuts that are ravaging education budgets have seen vital school support posts axed. The Minister might not value these jobs, but we know that parents and teachers do. How can schools provide a safe and secure environment for their children, prevent truancy and deal with pupil behaviour challenges with reduced staff numbers?

We have also seen the impact on class sizes. The first real-terms cuts to school budgets in a generation and reductions in teaching staff mean that pupils are being taught in super-sized classes. Analysis of overcrowding in English primary schools has revealed that more than half a million pupils are being taught in super-sized classes. The mounting pressure on school places is now starting to hit secondary schools, with figures showing an increase in the number of pupils in very large classes in the last year. The Local Government Association has shown that half of councils in England are at risk of being unable to meet the increasing demand for secondary school places within the next five years, and the Government are doing precious little about it.

The south-east and the north-west are two of the worst-hit areas, with the latest figures showing more than 90,000 primary school pupils in classes of more than 30. The number of infant schoolchildren between five and seven years of age in classes of more than 30 has almost trebled since 2010. This situation is unsustainable. If the Minister really wants to give every child the education they deserve, he needs to ensure that children are not being crammed into super-sized classes.

Our key education unions have done a magnificent job in highlighting the cuts to every school up and down the country—that has been credited with causing 750,000 people to switch their votes at the last general election. They have set out five tests for what is required for a fair funding settlement. The fact is that the Minister has failed on every one of them. School cuts have not been reversed: some 88% of schools still face real-terms budget cuts. There is no new money in the education budget, and we are yet to discover where the shortfalls will occur within the Department. High needs, early years and post-16 education will not, as promised, be fairly funded under the new proposals. The Minister has made no long-term funding commitments, so schools are still in limbo. What happens beyond 2020? When can our schools expect the information they need about longer-term funding, so that they can plan their budgets effectively? Yet again, historic underfunding for our schools is not being addressed.

Attainment has been pointed out already. If we draw a line from the Humber estuary to the Mersey estuary, the number of kids living above it on free schools meal achieving five good GCSEs is 34%. If we look at where Labour invested—right here in the capital city, with the London Challenge—50% of kids on free school meals achieve five good GCSEs. The budget cuts are damning everybody with the same outcomes. There are more than half a million children crammed in super-sized classes and more than 24,000 unqualified teachers in schools, up 52% from 2012. While I of course support the principle that schools should receive fair funding, the answer is not to take money away from existing schools and redistribute it when budgets in other areas are being cut. There should be fairness in the funding formula, but there is nothing fair about a proposal under which funding will be cut from high-performing schools in deprived areas. The solution is to invest in education, to help every child receive an excellent education.

5.17 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this important debate. As she said, we recently met to discuss in detail the funding position of schools in her constituency, and I welcome this opportunity to continue that discussion.

Debating this issue is welcome at a time when the Government have recently announced an increase in school funding, as well as the details of the historic new national funding formula. The Government want to ensure that all children, regardless of where they live, receive a world-class education. Over the past seven years, we have made significant progress: more schools than ever before are rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding, and the attainment gap between those from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds is beginning to close.

That progress has been made despite an unfair national funding system that has failed to take account of significant changes in the challenges faced by schools in different parts of the country. For too long, the unfair distribution of funding between schools has acted, I believe, as a brake on the progress they have been able to make. That is why it is so important that we are delivering on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated system and introduce a national funding formula.

Mr Howarth: I think it is agreed on both sides that the existing funding formula is unfair. Part of the case that my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and I have made is that the recent adjustments somehow succeeded in making it even more unfair for some schools. That does not seem to be a sensible way to deal with this.
Nick Gibb: Under the recent adjustments, according to the national funding formula, all schools will gain funding: no school will lose money or face a cut in funding, despite what has been claimed by the National Education Union, and despite what hon. Members have said during the debate. In fact, funding for schools across Knowsley will increase on average by 7.1%. I did not hear the right hon. Gentleman mention that in either of his interventions.

Mrs Ellman: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way because there is a very short amount of time left, but I will come to the hon. Lady’s comments shortly.

It cannot be right that local authorities with similar needs and characteristics receive very different levels of funding from central Government. Across the country, schools teaching children with the same needs get markedly different amounts of money for no good reason. At the heart of the problem is the fact that the data used to allocate funding to local authorities are over a decade out of date, leading to manifest unfairness in how funding is distributed. This year, Nottingham, for example, will receive £555 more per pupil than Halton, despite having equal proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals.

Funding for each area has been determined by simply rolling forward the previous year’s allocation, adjusting only for changes in the total number of pupils in each area and ignoring everything else. The proportion of secondary pupils eligible for free school meals in London, for example, fell from 22.4% in 2007 to 17% in 2017, compared with a decline nationally from 13.1% to 12.9%, but the funding system has paid no attention to that significant shift. That is not a rational, fair or efficient system for distributing money to our schools.

That is why the Government are reforming the existing system with the introduction of a national funding formula for schools and high needs. Informed by the consultation that we undertook, with 26,000 responses, we will introduce a national funding formula from April 2018, ending the current unfair postcode lottery system. For the first time, the funding system will deliver resources on a consistent and transparent basis, right across the country, reflecting local needs.

Last month, we published full details of both the school and high-needs national funding formulae and the impact they will have for every local authority. We have also published notional school-level allocations showing what each school would attract through the formula. It means that everyone can see what the national funding formula will mean for them and understand why. It is notional because we are taking the national funding formula as though it had been fully implemented in this financial year, 2017 to 2018, so that people and schools can see what the effects of that formula would be on their schools with those particular pupils this year. It is a very effective way of describing what will happen under the formula. The actual funding will depend on the actual pupils at that school next year, and we will make announcements nearer the time in the usual way.

To provide stability for schools through the transition to the national funding formula, for the next two years local authorities will continue to set their own local formulae in consultation with local schools and the schools forum. That element of flexibility will allow them to respond to changes as they come through and take account of local issues.

As well as a fairer distribution of funding, the total quantum available is also important. We want schools to have the resources they need to deliver a world-class education for their pupils. We understand that, just like other public services, schools are facing cost pressures. In recognition of those facts, the Secretary of State announced in July an additional £1.3 billion for schools and high needs across 2018-19 and 2019-20, in addition to the funding confirmed at the 2015 spending review.

The additional funding will be distributed across the next two years as we implement the national funding formula. Core funding for schools and high needs will rise from nearly £41 billion this financial year—its own record high in school funding—to £42.4 billion in 2018-19 and to £43.5 billion in 2019-20. Overall, that means that the total schools budget will increase by over 6% between this year and 2019-20. That will mean that funding per pupil for schools and high needs will now be maintained in real terms for the remaining two years of the spending review.

The additional funding that we have announced means that we can provide a cash increase in respect of every school and every local authority area from April 2018. In the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood’s constituency, once the new formula is implemented in full, there will be an extra £1.3 million for block funding—an increase of 2.4%. Belle Vale Community Primary School will not face a cut in funding; it will have a 3% increase. Enterprise South Liverpool Academy will not face a cut in spending; it will have a 5.2% increase of £179,000. Gateacre School will not face a cut; it will have a 3.5% increase. Halewood Academy will not face a cut; it will have an 8.2% increase. Middlefield Community Primary School will have a 1.2% increase. St Francis Xavier’s College will have a 1% increase and Yew Tree Community Primary School will have a 5% increase in funding. None of the schools that I have not mentioned in the hon. Lady’s constituency will lose money; they will all gain about 1% or more.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) said that there will be cuts of £390 per pupil. In fact, in his constituency there will be a £1.1 million increase in funding, equal to 1.6%.

Dan Carden: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way, because we are very short of time now. As I said, across the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood’s constituency there will be a £3 million increase in funding. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) talked about cuts to funding in his schools. Croxteth Community Primary School will gain a 0.9% increase; Monksdown Primary, a 0.9% increase; St Edward’s College, a 1% increase; and St John Bosco Arts College—I enjoyed visiting that school—a 0.9% increase.

I can confirm that deprivation, mobility and low prior attainment are very significant factors in the funding formula. That is something that the Secretary of State was determined to have in the formula that we consulted on. Funding will increase by 0.6 million in schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman)—some 1.2% according to the national funding formula.
The extra £1.3 billion that we are investing means we will be able to go over and above our manifesto commitment that no school should lose funding as a result of the introduction of the national funding formula. Now, every school will attract at least 0.5% more per pupil in 2018-19 and 1% more in 2019-20. That change will have a particularly positive impact in Garston and Halewood: 23 of the 32 schools will gain through the formula as a result of the decision to raise the funding floor. I trust that the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood will welcome those changes when she has a chance to consider them more reflectively.

Following the strong representations that we received during the consultation, the formula will also provide all secondary schools with minimum per-pupil funding of £4,800 in 2019-20 and all primary schools with £3,500. In 2018-19, as a step towards those minimum funding levels, secondary schools will attract at least £4,600 and primary schools will attract £3,300. That new minimum level will recognise the challenges of the very lowest funded schools, including 14 schools across Liverpool. The changes delivered by the national funding formula will mean both Liverpool and Knowsley will be among the 10 highest-funded local authorities per pupil outside London.

We are particularly focused on supporting children who face the greatest barriers to success. That is why we are also committed to reforming the funding for children and young people with high and special needs. We are finally moving towards a more rational basis for distributing funding for children and young people with high needs, taking into account an up-to-date assessment of the level of need in each area.

The additional investment we are putting in means that every local authority will see a minimum increase in high needs funding of 0.5% in 2018-19 and 1% in 2019-20, but for south Liverpool, a fair allocation of resources means an even more significant increase in funding. Once our formula is implemented in full, Liverpool will see an increase of 17.1%, compared with their planned high needs spending in 2017-18, with Knowsley gaining 4.5%.

Moving towards this full formula allocation, local authorities will receive up to 3% per head gains a year for the next two years. As important as the fair allocation of funding is how that funding is used in practice. We are committed to helping schools improve outcomes for pupils and to promote social mobility by ensuring that they get the best value from all their resources.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood and other Members from the Liverpool area for taking part in this important debate. The Government will continue to support England’s schools by providing more funding than ever before, by making sure that that funding is distributed fairly and to where it is needed most and by helping schools to achieve more with that funding. That will help schools to sustain and improve the rapid progress our children and young people are making under this Government.

Introducing fair funding is an historic and necessary reform—one that previous Governments have avoided for too long. Thanks to the commitment of this Government to addressing issues of unfairness in our society, for the first time we have a clear and transparent system that matches funding to children’s needs and the needs of the schools that they attend. It will help all schools to deliver the high-quality education that their pupils deserve and it will ensure that all pupils are able to fulfil their potential.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered education funding in south Liverpool.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 11 October 2017

[Ms Karen Buck in the Chair]

Iran: Human Rights

9.30 am

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered human rights in Iran.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. Many observers hoped that the election of President Rouhani in Iran would lead to an improvement in the subject matter of our debate: respect for human rights in Iran. Unfortunately, there is no convincing evidence for that; in a number of respects, the situation appears to have worsened in recent years. In July, the Minister described the human rights situation in Iran as “dire”. In my view, he was correct to do so.

Earlier this year, Amnesty International highlighted a wave of floggings, amputations, blindings and other vicious physical punishments, which it described as exposing the Iranian authorities’ “utterly brutal sense of justice”. Hundreds are routinely flogged in Iran each year, sometimes in public. The country executes more people than anywhere else in the world except China. In 2015, 977 people were executed: the highest level in a quarter of a century. In January alone this year, Iran executed 87 people—that is, on average, one every nine hours.

Amnesty International reported in 2007 that Iran had executed more children between 1990 and 2005 than any other country in the world. Sadly, as recently as last Monday, 21-year-old Alireza Tajiki was executed. He was 15 when he was arrested and 16 when he was sentenced to death. He is believed to be the fourth person executed this year in Iran who was arrested as a child. Amnesty reports that there are 88 juvenile offenders on death row. It has also highlighted concerns that the court system lacks independence and impartiality.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The sister-in-law of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who is serving a prison sentence in Iran, lives in my constituency. Nazanin’s case was raised in the July Westminster Hall debate to which the right hon. Lady referred. While she has been in prison, two further charges have been proffered against Nazanin: accusations of involvement in organisations to overthrow the Government, Will the right hon. Lady join me in calling on the Foreign Secretary to do more and redouble his efforts on this case?

Theresa Villiers: I am happy to do that; I was planning to raise that worrying case slightly later in my remarks. I hope that the Minister and Foreign Secretary will do everything they can to try to secure the release of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

In terms of the court system, the concern is that people are often executed for offences that are vague or overly broad—or, in some cases, really not justified as criminal offences at all. Trials in front of so-called revolutionary courts can be grossly unfair. In some cases, long prison sentences have been imposed after trials lasting as little as 45 minutes.

I come back to the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman. Many of us in this House have spoken out in support of two British Iranian nationals held unjustly in prison in Iran. As we have heard, the first is Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has spent over a year in Tehran’s Evin prison after being sentenced to five years for non-specific charges relating to national security. I understand that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have both raised that case with their counterparts in Iran. Of course, I welcome that those representations have been made at such a high level, but it is gravely worrying that so far they have had little effect. Only yesterday, news emerged that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe could face additional criminal charges and a further prison sentence of 16 years.

The second case is that of 77-year-old Kamal Foroughi, a British Iranian businessman who has spent six years in jail in Iran. He has been denied medical leave, despite significant health problems. I urge the Minister to repeat the Government’s call for consular access to Nazanin and Kamal. I hope he will go further today and call for the immediate and unconditional release of both prisoners.

I am afraid that Iran continues to detain many civil society activists and opposition figures. Press freedom is heavily curtailed: the world press freedom index for 2016 ranks the country as the 11th worst in the world for free speech. Reporters Without Borders has dubbed Iran as “the Middle East’s biggest prison for journalists”. According to the “journalism is not a crime” project, 55 journalists, bloggers and cartoonists are currently in prison.

In June 2016, two Iranian musicians and one film-maker began a three-year prison sentence for online distribution of underground music. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s February report on human rights noted that more than 170 people were arrested in November purely on the basis of messages they posted on social media.

It is deeply worrying that the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are wholly unprotected in Iran and that homosexuality is a crime punishable by death. In August last year, gay teenager Hassan Afshar was executed. He had no access to a lawyer and was sentenced to death two months after being arrested.

The rights of women are heavily restricted, with strict rules on dress being just one of many ways in which their freedom is severely limited. Iran has no law against domestic violence and women’s rights activists are treated as criminals or even enemies of the state. A married woman is also not allowed to leave the country without the permission of her husband. In September 2015, for example, the captain of Iran’s female football team was unable to take part in an international tournament because her husband forbade her from travelling.

The minimum legal age for marriage for girls is generally 13, but that can be lowered in cases where the father and a court agree. Human Rights Watch published the deeply worrying statistic that there were more than 40,000 marriage registrations in one year where the girl was aged between 10 and 14. The Iranian legal system views girls as criminally responsible from the age of nine, permitting them to be sentenced to death. In 2015, a woman was sentenced to death by stoning in an Iranian court.
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate. She outlines in graphic detail the appalling litany of offences in Iran. Does she agree that it is time that not just our Government but the international community indicate to Iran that although it occasionally opens up towards being more transparent towards the west and appears to pursue moderation, it needs to make its mind up? The international community needs to ensure that Iran knows it has crossed the line. If Iran wishes to open up towards the west, these sorts of activities have to come to an end.

Theresa Villiers: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. After all, many said that securing the Iran deal would lead to change and open up relationships. The international community now needs to ensure that those opportunities are used to drive forward the urgently needed change and end the kind of terrible cruelty I have been outlining.

There is increasing concern about the plight of minority groups in Iran. All those communities, including Christians, Baha’is and Sunni Muslims, face discrimination and significant limitations on their political and democratic rights. Attempts by Muslims to change their faith can be met with criminal prosecution. There are also, I am afraid, regular reports of the arrest of members of the so-called house churches. Christian Solidarity Worldwide contacted me before the debate and told me that, earlier this year, 12 Christians were arrested while engaged in activities such as Christmas celebrations and a church picnic. They were later sentenced to prison terms considerably in excess of those stipulated by law.

Christians have often been detained for lengthy periods without being informed of what offences they will be charged with. Christian Solidarity Worldwide believes that since the presidential election in May 2017, there has been a sharp increase in the number of Christians receiving excessive sentences after being charged with vaguely worded and unsubstantiated national security charges such as “insulting the sacred” or “propaganda against the State”. That action has often been targeted at converts to Christianity, but even people from longstanding Christian communities have fallen victim to arrest and unfair imprisonment. Among recent worrying cases is that of the Assyrian pastor, the Rev. Victor Bet-Tamraz, who led the Pentecostal Assyrian Church in Tehran. On 3 July he was given a 10-year prison sentence for offences including “conducting evangelism” and “illegal house church activities”. His wife and son are also facing criminal prosecution.

The Baha’i community in Iran also faces continuing oppression. I have received reports that in the period since President Rouhani’s election in 2013, more than 150 Baha’is have been arrested, 28 have been expelled from universities for their religious beliefs, and more than 400 have suffered economic disadvantage as a result of actions such as intimidation of Baha’i business professionals or closure of Baha’i businesses. There is also grave concern about the demonisation of Baha’i by the authorities in Iran. It is believed that the virulent incitement to hatred and the propaganda that regularly emanate from official media outlets may have helped to create the conditions that led to the brutal murder in September 2016 of a member of the Baha’i community, Mr Farhang Amiri.

Finally, I draw the House’s attention to a series of events that are a source of great hurt and sadness for a number of my constituents, some of whom are present in the Public Gallery. The issue that they have raised with me is the mass killings that took place in Iran in 1988. It is believed that at least 30,000 people were summarily executed and buried in unmarked graves—all because they were calling for change, democracy and human rights. With us today are people who lost close relatives in those killings. In a report published in August, the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Iran, Asma Jahangir, concluded:

“If the number of persons who disappeared and were executed can be disputed, overwhelming evidence shows that thousands of persons were summarily killed. Recently, these killings have been acknowledged by some at the highest levels of the State.”

Ms Jahangir also referred to the publication of an audio tape, which implicated the Minister of Justice in Iran and a high court judge in those horrendous crimes. Ms Jahangir’s report tells us that following the publication of the audio recording, some clerical authorities and the chief of the judiciary admitted that the executions had taken place and, in some instances, even sought to defend them.

It is astonishing that people heavily associated with the violent events of 1988 have continued to play leading roles in the Rouhani Administration and Iranian public life. It is a source of deep regret that the international community has paid such minimal attention to what happened. The UN special rapporteur has called for a wide-ranging independent investigation. My constituents want the UK Government to condemn the 1988 killings as a crime against humanity and to back the call for an investigation. I appeal to the Minister to do that today. Next year is the 30th anniversary of those horrific events in Iran. It is time the relatives of those who lost their lives were given answers about what happened.

It is with real sadness that I have set out for the House just a part of the long list of human rights abuses carried out in the Islamic Republic of Iran on a daily basis. The Iranian Government are well known for their state sponsorship of terrorism, and their malign involvement in so many conflicts around the region is causing injury and death on a massive scale; but we should never forget the suffering they also inflict on their own population. No bright new dawn for Iran has emerged under the Rouhani regime. Nor has the nuclear deal led to any improvement in the situation. While diplomatic and business ties with Iran are steadily being restored and strengthened, the suffering continues and Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Mr Foroughi continue to languish in prison.

I urge the Minister today to ensure that the UK Government seize every opportunity to press for change in Iran and for an end to the cruelty inflicted by the authorities there on so many people. I hope that at the most senior levels the UK Government will use bilateral channels as well as the UN to strongly condemn the abuse of human rights in Iran. I understand that the UN General Assembly will vote on a resolution on the situation in Iran in November. I urge the Minister to take a tough line when those matters are debated. Above all, I ask him to condemn the 1988 massacre and give his support to the bereaved families who want answers about what happened to their loved ones, and who want those responsible for that terrible atrocity finally to be brought to justice.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. There is one organisation that I have been a member of longer than I have been in the Liberal Democrat party, and that is Amnesty International. Iran is of great concern to Amnesty, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on securing a debate on it.

It is sad that many hon. Members will also have participated in the debate on 20 December, when Nazanin’s and Kamal’s cases were raised. I am afraid that since then things have not got better; they have got significantly worse for both of them. Meanwhile, of course, Iranian-UK relations have probably, if anything, improved. The UK is clearly playing an important role in trying to safeguard the Iran deal, and a large contract has been agreed with a UK company for solar power in Iran. From that perspective relationships are improving—but for Nazanin and Kamal the situation has deteriorated.

The latest allegations made against Nazanin are as risible as they are depressing for her and her family. I do not think that anyone, including, possibly, the judge hearing the case, believes that there is any substance in them. Many hon. Members present today will be perplexed by Iran’s approach. Going back over millennia, perhaps the longest running major civilisation has been based in that country; so the way it is dealing with Nazanin and Kamal is something people fail to understand.

Something else that is pertinent, both at present and in relation to future UK Government arrangements, is the fact that many hon. Members are concerned about whether there is a risk, in a bid to secure trade deals—either between UK companies and Iranian counterparts, or the UK as a whole and other countries—of human rights falling off the agenda. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that that will not happen. We need to hear the Government use some frank, blunt words to put their position on Nazanin’s case to the Iranian Government. That is something that has been lacking.

I received an email from Kamal Foroughi’s son this morning; he said there are particular concerns about his health, which continues to deteriorate, with a need for a cataract operation and time off outside prison to recover from it. No one has been able to see the results of the medical tests that have been carried out on him since December, and he has not been able to have any visitors—humanitarian, family or social—for more than six years. For someone of his age that will clearly be detrimental.

One further point that he asked me to make is that our Foreign Secretary has not met the affected families. I assume he is correct—certainly Kamran will know whether our Foreign Secretary has met him—and if that is the case, I suggest that it is perhaps time that the Foreign Secretary took the trouble to meet him. As I understand it, when Kamran was in Whitehall last October, on the occasion of his father’s 2,000th day anniversary, and saw or tried to talk to the Foreign Secretary, the Foreign Secretary did say something—“Oh,” and “Right.” That was all he had to say to Mr Foroughi about Kamal’s case.

I know that the Minister is very focused on his brief, and that he will have something—I hope something positive—to say. It does seem, however, as though our Foreign Secretary is not from the same mould as the Minister, whom I greatly respect for his knowledge and understanding of foreign affairs.
their families. That the UN special rapporteur on Iran acknowledged the 1988 massacre in the report is a major achievement for the justice-seeking campaign. I pay tribute to my friends and colleagues at the National Council of Resistance of Iran, who have been campaigning vigorously on this issue and seeking for the British Government to acknowledge that it occurred.

My second point is that the human rights abuses concern not only Iranian but British citizens. Two people have already been mentioned today, but there is a third British citizen detained in Iran on spurious charges. Four Americans have been released since 2016, following the Iranian nuclear agreement, as part of a prisoner swap, but nothing similar has occurred for British citizens. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi have already been mentioned, but there is a third person, a 50-year-old lady named Roya Nobakht. She is an Iranian-British housewife who was put in prison after she returned to Iran in 2013 to visit her family. Two weeks after she arrived in the country, she flew to the city of Shiraz and was arrested by cyber police at the airport. Her crime, it seems, was that, while living in the UK, she had posted on Facebook that Iran was too Islamic.

The Iranian Government put her in prison and accused her of insulting Islamic sanctities, a crime that carries the death penalty. In June 2014, she was tried by branch 28 of the revolutionary court, and sentenced to 20 years in prison, later reduced to five years. Like others, she is in poor health; she has frequent seizures and has collapsed in her cell after being denied access to medication for depression. There is a fourth Briton, whose name we do not know. We are talking about human rights not just for citizens of Iran, but for British citizens.

**Tom Brake:** I would like the hon. Gentleman’s comments on what British businesses should be worried about in trading with Iran—particularly their employees going to Iran—if the Iranians are examining people’s social media in the way he has described. What is the potential risk to them?

**Dr Offord:** That is a good question. It is a huge risk for employees of British companies, or other companies working in Iran. Their media profiles and social media posts can be examined for any evidence of what the Iranian regime may wish to hold against them, or indeed their company. They may find themselves in some ways hostages to the trading activities of their companies. That is a great problem, but I believe that, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, we should not relegate human rights in favour of trade deals. That remains a great concern.

It has been more than two years since the Iranian nuclear deal was signed, yet human rights abuses in Iran have persisted, including the detention of British citizens and the denial of their basic rights, as well as Iran’s regional ambitions and sponsorship of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah. Indeed, *Hansard* reflects the comments I have made on Yemen, Hezbollah, Syria and other parts of the middle east where the Iranian nuclear deal has allowed resources to pour into those countries. I have been very critical of that. Indeed, I found it galling this morning to hear former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw defending Iran. Questions remain about Jack Straw’s involvement in extraordinary rendition—issues that we in this House have never been able to bottom out—and heuring him defend the Iranian regime is similar to listening to Harvey Weinstein talking about women’s rights. For him to speak about Iran today was greatly galling to me.

While Donald Trump may not be very popular with many people in this House or in the country more widely, I welcome his continuing to look at the Iranian nuclear deal. He will make an announcement later today on whether he will continue to agree to abide by that condition. I wish our own Foreign Secretary had not involved himself in that; it is a decision for the American President.

I have been very critical of the deal. I wish we had asked that human rights be part of the Iranian nuclear deal. We have found that there has been no progress not only in that area, but with our own people who are held in Iran, and most of all we have felt the malign influence of Iran in the middle east. Perhaps we, too, can look at that and the UK Government can decide whether we should continue to be a supporter of the agreement.

10 am

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on securing this important debate. She painted a bleak, sobering and depressing picture of life for those who step outside the accepted norms in Iran. She was absolutely right to say that many of us who have been concerned with human rights and freedom of religious belief for many years had hoped that with the re-election of President Rouhani in May, we would begin to see a lessening of the hard-line attitude that has become the hallmark of how Iran deals with people deemed to be out of step with the state’s politico-religious ideology. Many of us dared to hope that a more progressive Iran that embraced increased social, religious and political freedoms would emerge. We hoped for an Iran that would finally adhere to the treaties on human rights and freedom of religious expression to which it was a signatory.

Unfortunately, that simply has not happened, and the December 2016 citizens’ rights charter, which talked optimistically about freedom of expression and the right to life regardless of religion, seems as distant as ever. Indeed, there is ample evidence that intolerance, discrimination and persecution of both secular and religious minority groups has increased in Iran, with the regime increasingly hiding behind, as we have heard, that great catch-all offence—“conspiracy against Iran’s national security”. It is using that law to put both journalists and minority religious communities such as the Baha’i and Christian groups under enormous pressure. As we have heard, earlier this year the United Nations special rapporteur on Iran confirmed that “severe limitations and restrictions” on religious minorities persist and that the number of prisoners of conscience in Iran remains staggeringly high.

Every speaker today has rightly highlighted the appalling cases of the British citizens in jail in Iran and particularly that of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I add my voice and support to what has been said about her outrageous imprisonment, based on the nonsensical idea that because of her work with Thomson Reuters and previously with the BBC, she was, as the court case says, “specifically working to overthrow the regime”.
Unfortunately, that is evidence of a mindset that still exists in Iran. It is confirmation, if any were needed, of Tehran’s paranoia about a free press.

I was contacted last week by the National Union of Journalists, which told me that 152 of its members currently working in London for the BBC’s Persian service had previously seen their assets frozen in Iran and were not allowed to buy or sell property in that country. All 152 of them have just been informed that they have been charged in their absence with “conspiracy against Iran’s national security”.

Of course, the journalists cannot defend themselves against the charges unless they travel to Iran to stand trial. If they do so, the likelihood is, going by Iran’s recent record, that they will end up in jail for a very long time. However, many of the journalists still have family living in Iran, and according to the NUJ, many of their family members have been interogated by the security services and encouraged to put pressure on their relatives working at the BBC to leave their job or agree to spy on their colleagues.

As I said, the offence of “conspiracy against Iran’s national security” is used extensively to pursue not only journalists, but minority religious communities. As the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet said, in the last few weeks 12 Christians have been sentenced to prison terms far in excess of what is laid down in the law after being found guilty of “acting against Iran’s national security”.

As the right hon. Lady rightly pointed out, the charges arose from such innocuous events as Christmas celebrations and attending a church picnic. I understand that the majority of the 12 involved are Christian converts—a group of people who seem to be particularly reviled in Iran by the theocratic regime, as they are deemed not only to have betrayed their faith, but to have rejected the state itself.

There are other examples. Only last month, two Christian converts, a married couple, Mehrdad Hushmand and his wife Sara Nemati, were reportedly detained the day after attending and participating in a Christian funeral. Since the day they were detained, only Sara has been able to contact her family, and has done so just once. No reason has been given for their detention, and nothing is known of their health, legal status or even their exact whereabouts. That is happening despite the fact that the rights of Christians and other religious minorities are explicitly protected under the Iranian constitution, and regardless of the fact that Iran is a signatory to many international agreements that guarantee the right of an individual to change their faith should they wish to do so.

However, it is not just minority Christian groups that are targeted. As we have heard, the Baha’i community, which has 300,000 members and is Iran’s largest non-Muslim religious minority, suffers systematic persecution simply because of its religious belief. The Iranian authorities seem absolutely determined to marginalise and remove the social and economic rights of the Baha’i community. Indeed, an official memorandum, dating back to 1991, from the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council explicitly states that the Government’s dealings with the Baha’i community should be conducted “in such a way that their progress and development are blocked.” As a result, the Baha’i community is often demonised in official state media and from the pulpits of mosques. The authorities have given a green light for blatant discrimination—discrimination that, as we have heard, all too often leads to violence and murder.

Regardless of who it is done to, state persecution is wrong, and when it occurs, it is incumbent on us to say so. The Minister is a great champion of human rights and religious freedom. Will he add his voice and that of the UK Government to those around the world saying to Tehran that the harassment, imprisonment and punishment of individuals who exercise peacefully their right to practise their chosen faith must stop, that the smokescreen of hiding behind the catch-all “conspiracy against Iran’s national security” is both intolerable and unacceptable and that we expect Iran to abide by its own constitution as well as the international treaties that it has signed up to and begin to uphold the rights of religious and ethnic minority communities within its own borders? And will the Minister promise to do everything he and his Department can do to secure the immediate release of Kamal Foroughi and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratchifie?

10.8 am

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Ms Buck, I apologise for being slightly late and entering the Chamber when my right hon. Friend, the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) was speaking.

I am delighted to participate in the debate and I congratulate my right hon. Friend on initiating it. She is well known for her travails in Northern Ireland as Secretary of State. She brought together people who were polar opposites and did a brilliant job. I am glad that she has now been released from the shackles of government and can lead the campaign for human rights around the world and particularly in Iran.

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I agree with the remarks made by my hon. Friends and by Opposition Members on human rights, but I particularly want to concentrate on the massacre of 30,000 political prisoners in 1988. Many of us have had the opportunity to attend conferences, in this place or externally, that have shown clear evidence of the extent of that massacre. I have heard the first-hand experiences of the relatives of those who were executed, people who escaped from that massacre, and the first-hand experience of the repression and persecution of minorities that routinely take place.

Theresa Villiers: Does my hon. Friend agree that the publication of the report by the UN special rapporteur, which clearly acknowledges that these events did happen, should be a reason for the Government to take this more seriously, and to begin to raise it more vigorously in international forums such as the UN?

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I was coming on to the special rapporteur's report, which gives a world view of the massacre. This is not a few itinerants saying, "We believe this happened." This shines the light of transparency on what happened 30 years ago in Iran. I regret that our Foreign and Commonwealth Office has not taken up this call, and not taken the view that we need to take action on the report. I would urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to make sure that we take up this issue in a particular way, and make sure that Britain lends its support to the rights of minorities and those people who were drastically affected by this massacre.

In the last Parliament, I was pleased to co-sponsor an early-day motion with the former Member for Mansfield, Sir Alan Meale, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and the former Member for Lewisham West and Penge. The early-day motion set out the position—I reiterate—that we note "that the audio file of Ayatollah Montazeri, former heir to Khomeini, in 1988, reveals new evidence about the massacre of more than 30,000 political prisoners in Iran's prisons in the summer of 1988 including women and children and all political prisoners who supported the opposition movement of the People's Mujahedin of Iran (PMOI); understands that the massacre was carried out following a fatwa by the Supreme Leader Khomeini; is concerned by Montazeri's comments that this was the biggest crime that has occurred in the Islamic Republic and that the world will not forgive us" if we stand idly by and allow the authorities of the Iranian regime to act with impunity, as they have done in the past few decades, which is the main cause for continuation of these crimes in Iran. We endorse the survivors' account that those in charge of the massacre go unpunished and are currently in the highest positions in the Iranian Government.

The reality is that we can table early-day motions and make speeches in this place. That does have an effect, and builds pressure on the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the regime in Iran, but we need our Government and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in particular to take up the issue. Last year, we had a similar cross-party statement by more than 100 MPs and peers. That demonstrates the wealth of support in Parliament for action on this issue.

On 21 September, the UN Security Council adopted an historic resolution proposed by the UK to bring Daesh to justice. That shows that Britain can bring war criminals to justice. Now is the time for the United Kingdom to co-sponsor a motion bringing justice for the victims of the 1988 massacre. I look forward to the Minister's reply. The FCO can do more, and it could acknowledge and support the viable 10-point democratic platform for the future, as presented by the NCRI president, Madame Maryam Rajavi, which calls for the abolition of the death penalty, torture and the theocracy's Shi'a laws, as well as the prohibition of the suppression of women and any forms of discrimination against followers of any religion and denomination, as required by the UN charter.

I would also urge, in conclusion, my right hon. Friend the Minister to address the fundamental issue that opposition to the theocratic regime in Iran should be given a voice and a platform in this country. I believe that Madame Rajavi should be issued with an invitation to visit this country and shine the light of transparency on what is going on in Iran. I look forward to the Minister's response to the proposal to give that opportunity to the NCRI and the PMOI, to expose once and for all to the British public what it is like to live in Iran and what could be done as an alternative to the current theocratic regime.

10.16 am

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I, too, would like to thank the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for securing this debate. It was quite shocking to listen to the seemingly inexhaustible list of human rights abuses by Iranian authorities. It was quite numbing to hear them all. I think it is right that we focus on human rights, as that issue has been a central thrust of my very short parliamentary career since being elected two years ago, but I would also like to focus on the fate of journalists, both those working inside Iran and those working remotely from the UK. I declare an interest as a former BBC journalist and the chair of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary committee. I do that for the record to state my solidarity with journalists both in Iran and around the world, who strive to do nothing more than ask questions in an attempt to hold power to account.

As we know, Iran has elections that many other inhabitants of the middle east can only envy. Here I state a truism, but it is essential that we set it down, that elections are only ever one element of a functioning democracy. A democracy where bloggers and reporters must risk their lives and the well-being of their families in order to comment on the political life of their country cannot be seen as a democracy in the true sense. Democracy is not worth the ballot paper it is printed on without freedom of the press. There is a barrier to informing the electorate, as the press provides feedback to the legislature. The often brutal suppression of those speakers also creates a chilling fear that acts as a cancer on all of those forming opinions and on the ability to take action in the public arena.

It is important to make the point that Iran is not a homogeneous political entity. I have heard other hon. Members make comments about the political situation in Iran. There are reformers, as they are called, as well as the politically established so-called hardliners. I do
not know where we place President Rouhani in all this, considering that much of the repression discussed today has occurred on his watch. However, I do know one hardliner, someone who is not a friend of civil liberties and human rights: President Trump. His suspected refusal to re-certify the Iran nuclear deal can only have the effect of pushing Iran ever further into the hands of those hardliners.

I will come back to the journalists. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) mentioned a constituent of his who has been in prison, I would like to mention three journalists who are being held and are on hunger strike. Soheil Arabi has been in prison since 2013 and has been on hunger strike for over a month. Mehdi Khazali was arrested in August and has been on hunger strike since the day of his arrest. Ehsan Mazandarani was arrested in 2015 and has been denied early release despite very poor health. There are many more prisoners I could mention. Their stories make for chilling reading.

The long arm of control reaches way beyond Iran and stretches as far as those working in our very own BBC, as the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) mentioned. Charges have been filed against almost all the Iranian journalists working for the BBC’s Persian-language service in London; 152 journalists have been charged with conspiracy against Iran’s national security and have faced constant harassment and intimidation and an effective freeze on all their Iran-based assets. Those charged cannot defend themselves unless they return to Iran, which they feel unable to do for fear of reprisal. I beg the Minister to raise these names whenever he meets his Iranian counterparts and to push the issues of journalism, freedom of the press and democracy very clearly, as I know he will.

To end with a general comment, there are far too many in politics today who wish to criticise only the countries that fit into a very black and white binary. Many in politics today who wish to criticise only the countries that fit into a very black and white binary. I am incredibly concerned about is the wellbeing of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi. It is alarming

10.21 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I thank the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for securing this important debate. A number of hon. Members have spoken on this topic before; having been newly elected to the House in June, I appreciate this first opportunity to do so myself.

Before I speak about the more specific issues, I want to mention the use of the death penalty in Iran. As the right hon. Lady mentioned, the Foreign Office estimates that there were more than 530 executions in Iran in 2016. That figure is simply staggering, although, surprisingly, it represents a decrease on the previous year. Men and women risk capital punishment if they are found to be gay. The human rights record for people from an LGBTQ background is appalling. Even more worryingly, the death penalty continues to be used against juveniles in the country, and the FCO’s report notes that it is issued even in cases that are not deemed “the most serious” under international law, such as drugs offences.

There seems to have been some progress recently: in August, the Iranian Parliament approved a long-awaited amendment to legislation that significantly raises the bar for mandatory death sentences in drugs cases. Evidence given to the Iranian Parliament when the legislation was being drafted revealed that 5,000 people, the majority in their 20s and 30s, were currently on death row for drug-related offences. That in itself should highlight how ineffective the death penalty has been.

I am also deeply concerned about reports of mass executions in 2016: 20 members of the Kurdish minority were executed for terrorism-related offences and later in the same month, 12 people were hanged for drugs-related charges. Hopefully, future FCO reports will show the number of executions falling sharply because of the change in the law. Does it go far enough? Obviously not, but it is a step in the right direction.

I must also mention women’s rights. Women in Iran face intolerable oppression and discrimination on issues such as marriage, divorce and child custody. Women have been sent to jail for publicly speaking out in favour of equal rights. They are severely restricted in Iran, to the point where they are even forbidden from spectating at male sports—including Iran’s national obsession, volleyball. It is deeply troubling that Iran has no anti-domestic-violence legislation and that the legal age for marriage is just 13. For fear of getting emotional, I will not go into all the research around the age of consent, but what happens to young girls is deeply worrying.

Another matter is freedom of expression. There are signs of growing oppression, as Iranian authorities struggle to deal with the impact of new technology on freedom of speech. The de facto third-party messaging application here seems to be WhatsApp, but in Iran a similar app has risen to prominence. Much like WhatsApp, Telegram allows encrypted communication between individuals. According to the Iranian Students Polling Agency, almost six in 10 Iranians use Telegram, but use of the app seems to be shifting. A couple of years ago, two thirds of people polled said that they used it for entertainment purposes, but today only a quarter say the same. Iranians seem to be getting more of their information from the broadcast channels that the app gives access to.

Telegram played a significant role in recent parliamentary elections. Since Twitter and Facebook are blocked in Iran, the app provided a platform for campaigning. The Iranian establishment, however, has stepped up a crackdown on Telegram channels that challenge it and dozens of activists have been arrested in the past few months. In August, the administrator of one political Telegram channel was sentenced to four years in jail. There are fears that the Iranian authorities could now block Telegram altogether; I would appreciate it if the Minister addressed that in his speech. This is a very worrying trend that adds a new dimension to the further repression of freedom of expression.

Another troubling issue that, like other Members, I am incredibly concerned about is the wellbeing of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi. It is alarming
to learn that additional charges have now been brought against Nazanin that could extend her jail term by 16 years. The detail in both cases is extremely harrowing. They have been held in the notorious Evin prison, sometimes in solitary confinement. There are very serious health concerns in both cases; I understand that Kamal is being denied screening for prostate cancer. That is totally unacceptable.

Both trials were, of course, conducted in secrecy. The prisoners had little access to lawyers prior to the trials, which makes a mockery of the justice system. Iran does not recognise dual nationality status, so it treated both prisoners as solely Iranian citizens and did not recognise their rights as British citizens.

There was quite a lot of initial excitement when Hassan Rouhani was elected as President of Iran in 2013, not just because he was seen as a moderate but—in my own context—because he was seen as an honorary Glaswegian. It is perhaps not well known that he studied twice at university in Glasgow. During his time there, he completed his PhD thesis on “The flexibility of Shariah (Islamic law) with reference to the Iranian experience”. I gather from Glasgow Caledonian University that his thesis is still available at the library and can be taken out and read. Anyone who takes the opportunity to read it will be struck by the first line in the abstract, which states that “no laws in Islam are immutable.”

The thesis demonstrates that a younger Rouhani was willing to embrace a more liberal and moderate approach to society. I conclude with my message to President Rouhani, from one Glaswegian to another: embrace that moderate tone and drastically improve human rights for your people.

10.27 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Buck. We have had a number of debates on this important issue and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on securing and introducing this one. It is another opportunity to ensure that the abuses of human rights in general and of the human rights of our own citizens—the dual nationals in Iran—are brought to prominence once again. Hopefully, by debating them, we put further pressure on the regime.

I do not know how many Members have visited Iran. I have myself, although it is 10 years since I have been there. Iran has many centres of power and an extraordinary history and culture, but it also has the most shocking and unacceptable human rights abuses, right across the country, thanks to the current Government, who were brought to power in the Islamic revolution of 1979. The right hon. Lady brought to our attention the suffering inflicted daily by the revolutionary Government on their own population—something that we are all aware of. The fact that 40,000 marriages of girls between 10 and 14 years old were approved in 2015 is enough to make us deeply concerned. The right hon. Lady was right to point to the cruelty and the lack of any regard for the human rights of individuals, especially women and—of course—children.

I was not aware that the right hon. Lady’s constituent, Ms Jahangir, had come to her about the mass executions of 1988, but I hope that now the Government are aware of that story—I am sure they already were—at least some further work can be done through the United Nations to bring more of it to light and to expose the appalling crimes carried out and covered up by the current regime. It is clear to me that, as the right hon. Lady said, the UK Government should redouble their efforts to relieve cruelty and suffering in Iran, and take a tough line.

We heard from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who mentioned again Nazanin Zahari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi. He said that he hoped that trade deals with Iran following the relaxation of measures that followed the Iran nuclear deal, which many people in Westminster Hall have criticised today, would not mean that human rights fell off the agenda. Of course he is absolutely right, and I do not believe that this Government or any other would want that to happen. Has the Foreign Secretary met the families of those people? I hope that the Minister will enlighten us on that. It is very important that the Foreign Secretary should at least give those families that bucking and moral support.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), who I know has stood up again for those whose human rights have been abused in Iran. He talked about the prisoners whom we have not mentioned—I do not wish to discuss their cases further today, because I know that their families have asked for them not to be discussed. However, he was right to point out that there are not just the two well-publicised cases of Nazanin and Kamal.

The hon. Gentleman also said that we should not relegate human rights in Iran for the sake of trade deals, and I agree. He also attacked the former Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw. I heard the interview on the radio this morning: the hon. Gentleman claimed that the former Foreign Secretary was defending the Iranian regime, but what I heard was a defence of the Iran nuclear deal, which I believe we should continue to support, while also putting pressure on the Iranian Government over their shocking human rights record. I believe that the former Foreign Secretary defended that nuclear deal and not the regime’s human rights record. Jack Straw is not here to defend himself today. Having worked with him as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee during his entire time as Foreign Secretary, I know that he was an outstanding Foreign Secretary for this country. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman feels that he should be criticised in that way.

We had contributions, of course, from our Scottish National party colleagues and then Bob Blackman—sorry, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman); I have been here long enough to know that I should not mention names—talked about the Jewish community in Iran. When I was in Iran 10 years ago, I had the privilege of meeting members of that community. There are still people from the Jewish community living in Iran, particularly in Tehran; I believe that there are about 20,000 Jewish people in Tehran and several synagogues, too. However, those synagogues are patrolled by Iranian police officers. Having met members of the Iranian Jewish community, I know that they are living in constant fear; there is no doubt about that. I attempted to talk to the one member
of the Majlis reserved for the Jewish community, knowing full well that he speaks very good English, but he replied to me in Farsi. He refused to speak to me in English; clearly he was frightened because he knew that others were listening to what he was saying to a westerner.

So Jews live in Iran but the situation is tragic. Many Jewish people of Iranian origin live in the United Kingdom and they still carry their Iranian culture and heritage with them. Indeed, as a child from a Jewish family myself, I was brought up knowing many such individuals, including one who shared chambers with my mother when she was at Middle Temple as a barrister. We had very close contact with them.

Then my esteemed colleague, Clive Lewis—sorry, I am doing it again; my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis)—made a contribution. He was a well-known journalist earlier in his life; he worked for the BBC in Leeds, which is how I first met him. He stood up for journalists and bloggers today—reporters who risk their lives every single day to tell the truth about what is actually happening in Iran.

My hon. Friend was right that democracy is not just about putting a cross on a ballot paper; it is about openness and freedom, including freedom of expression without fear. Yet we know that anybody who tells the truth about the human rights abuses and other cases of cruelty in Iran day to day is under attack and, even worse, under fear of arrest—they are often actually arrested and charged. That is simply not acceptable and it is certainly not democracy.

We know about the history of human rights abuses in Iran; some of those took place even before the creation of the Islamic republic, but the situation has certainly got a lot worse since. We also know that although Iran is a signatory to many human rights conventions, in practice it ignores or restricts them. A lot of the information and evidence about that comes through the UN special rapporteur to Iran and other human rights experts.

For example, as we have already heard this morning, we know that Iran regularly—indeed, all the time—discriminates against and actively oppresses religious minorities: not only the Jewish community but the Christians and Zoroastrians, too. As we have also heard, Iran executes the highest number of people per capita in the world. According to the United Nations, Iran executes about 1,000 people in 2015. It has already been said that that is the highest number per capita in the world. According to the United Nations, since Rouhani took office 2,400 executions have taken place in Iran, which is double the number in the same period—about four years—prior to 2010. President Rouhani himself has said that he supports the process of judicial executions and described executions as “God’s commandments”. Currently, there are 5,000 people on death row in Iran for drug offences alone. Iran does not announce all executions officially so the number of executions could be a lot higher than we realise. There are not only public executions in the towns and cities of Iran but mass executions in jails that often go completely unreported.

I want to make a few comments about juvenile executions. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force in 1992, prohibits the use of the death penalty for offences committed by those under the age of 18. Iran is a signatory to a number of treaties, including that convention, which it signed in 1994. It is therefore legally obliged to treat everyone under the age of 18 as a child and any crimes they have allegedly committed as the crimes of a child. Moreover, article 91 of the Islamic penal code, which has been enforced since 2013, grants judges the discretion not to apply the death sentence to children who do not understand the nature of their crimes. However, Iran is still no closer to abolishing the death penalty for children.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister what more the Government can do to secure the release of Nazanin Zahari-Ratchcliffe and Kamal Foroughi, and the two other dual nationals currently being held in Iran. I also urge the Government not to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal; instead, they should continue to press the Iranian Government on their record of human rights abuses. I hope that the Minister will give us some reassurance when he sums up.

10.39 am

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Buck. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to an excellent debate introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), to whom I pay tribute, as colleagues have done, not only for her excellent work in Northern Ireland, but for her steadfast support of human rights, particularly those involving freedom of religion. I am grateful to her for securing the debate.

I am grateful for the contributions of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), my hon. Friends the Members for Hendon (Dr Offord) and for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), and for Glasgow East (David Linden). I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) who speaks for the Opposition and with some knowledge, having been to Tehran. He has a good background in relation to the debate. I appreciate the way in which he and other colleagues couched their remarks.

First, I want to put on the record some remarks on human rights so it is clear what we think about this in general and what we have done in relation to Iran.
Then I want to mention what colleagues have said about attitudes to Iran, the nuclear deal and dual nationals before I go on to specifics. I do not want to run out of time, so I will mention those things first.

The United Kingdom deplores human rights violations and abuses wherever they occur and we call them out whenever we learn of them. It is because of our concern over the violation of human rights that we designated Iran as one of our human rights priority countries, and we have integrated human rights into the work of our diplomats right across the network. The human rights situation in Iran remains dire and we are determined to continue to hold the Government to account. We frequently release statements condemning the human rights situation in Iran and lead action by the international community. We have also designated more than 80 Iranians responsible for human rights violations under EU sanctions, helped to establish a UN special rapporteur for Iran’s human rights, and lobbied at the UN for the adoption of human rights resolutions on Iran. We regularly raise human rights in our dialogue with Iran, which I will speak about in a moment.

I therefore recognise the deep concern and frustration expressed here today at the lack of progress made by Iran to improve its human rights record. The latest report of the UN special rapporteur for human rights clearly sets out the appalling situation in Iran and highlights a wide range of areas that need to be addressed. The UK agrees with her assessment. I want to get that clearly on the record before I go on to say one or two other things.

First, I will tackle the issue of attitudes to Iran. One of the most difficult things that the Government have to contend with is how to deal with issues in countries that are friendly and less friendly when we are trying to create a relationship, and we have to acknowledge that countries do things that do not fit well with what the United Kingdom believes in. That applies to allies as well as to those we do not consider to be allies. Many countries around the world have practices with which the United Kingdom has to deal. We integrate human rights into the work of our diplomats right across the network. The human rights society have to go about it in a particular way. The charter of citizens rights is the first of its kind in Iran. It has the potential to have a positive impact.

Another part of the engagement is the JCPOA—the joint comprehensive plan of action—or nuclear deal. It was never intended that the nuclear deal would be an all-embracing agreement with Iran, whereby in return for a stop on progress towards a nuclear weapon everything else would be taken into account. There are different views and expectations of the deal, but I, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister are clear on what the nuclear deal was about. In a world where it has proved difficult in some places to restrain states, Iran stopped its progress towards a nuclear weapon. Just that; not all the other things that we have concerns about in Iran. Iran knows there are other issues in the region that have been highlighted by colleagues, and we know we must continue the progress on those.

The nuclear deal did the job it was designed to do. It is the United Kingdom’s view that Iran has held to the terms of the deal. That is why we still support it. The House should not think that because we agree on that, we have given a green light to Iran in relation to other things and that other concerns have come to a halt. They have not; those talks go on. One thing was agreed in a situation of great difficulty after many years and with huge distrust on both sides. The deal was not born of trust, but distrust, and putting in place the mechanisms to make sure verification was possible. Although lots of other things are on the table, the fact that this is in the bracket it is in and is being stuck to is not a bad thing. Now we must move on to other things.

I will now deal with specific issues mentioned in the debate by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington. The issues are difficult but I want to express clearly what we are doing. We are doing everything we possibly can. Our ambassador raises the issue of dual national detainees with the Iranian authorities at every possible opportunity; he seeks to secure consular access and to ensure their welfare. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I have all raised the cases with our counterparts and we have stressed the importance of resolving them as quickly as possible. This is clearly a very distressing situation for all the families of the British detainees, let alone for the detainees themselves, and our hearts go out to them. We are in regular contact with the families through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I have met the families of some of the dual nationals in the UK and in Tehran. I have tried to reassure them that the British Government are making every possible effort. We will continue to raise their loved ones’ cases with the Iranian Government at every possible opportunity in an attempt to seek a change.
Alistair Burt: I understand that point, but the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the dual nationals we are talking about are not the only detainees held in confinement around the world. It seems appropriate that the Minister responsible for the area meets the families. The Foreign Secretary has indeed raised the cases, and continues to do so, at the highest level. I do not want to speak for the Foreign Secretary in relation to this. I hope my own engagement as the Minister most responsible meets the needs of the families. They are well aware of the concerns that we express at the highest level. I am puzzled, disappointed and deeply concerned by the latest news reports concerning Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Yesterday, I spoke to the Iranian ambassador in the UK to express that concern and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will speak to his counterpart, Foreign Minister Zarif, later today about this and other matters. I also spoke to our ambassador in Tehran to seek further information on what further circumstances Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe is facing. We do not yet have that clarification, and it is possible that matters are not quite as they appear in the media, but we are urgently trying to find out exactly what those circumstances are and I will continue to press on that.

I remain of the strong view that the humanitarian situation of a mother separated from her child should prompt her release, not least on the grounds that under Iranian law she is eligible for parole in relation to the first charges that she faced within the next few weeks. That view has been expressed clearly and regularly to the Iranian authorities with which we are engaged. That is what we are seeking to do in relation to the dual nationals. I assure colleagues that those people are uppermost in our minds, and we are trying to handle their best interests. We will continue to press the cases of all the dual nationals whenever we can.

Colleagues raised the matter of the death penalty. We remain extremely concerned about the high number of executions in Iran, including those of juvenile offenders. According to Amnesty International, at least 247 people have been executed since January—at least three of whom were under 18 when the crime was committed. That practice is not only appalling, but in direct violation of international conventions that prohibit juveniles from being sentenced to death, to which Iran is a signatory. In looking for opportunities for the future, there is a small sign of progress, as perhaps the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington first. The hon. Member for Glasgow North is quite new to the debate.

Tom Brake: I thank the Minister for giving way. He might be about to come on to this. I welcome the fact that the Minister—as I said earlier, I greatly respect him—has met the families. I posed the question about whether the Foreign Secretary would meet them. Given the circumstances, it would be entirely appropriate for him to meet them. Will the Minister raise that with the Foreign Secretary?

Alistair Burt: I will give way to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington first. The hon. Member for Glasgow North is quite new to the debate. 

Colleagues raised the issue of freedom of expression, Iran's record on which is also poor. The special rapporteur notes that at least 12 journalists and 14 bloggers and social media activists are currently in detention for their peaceful activities. In April, three separate channel administrators on the popular messaging app Telegram, mentioned by colleagues this morning, were each sentenced to 12 years in prison for “collusion and gathering against the regime and insulting the leader and founder of the Islamic Revolution”.

Voice calls over Telegram were also banned. That is not what an open and free society looks like. The British Government therefore call on Iran to adhere to its international obligations and to release all those who have been detained for exercising their right to freedom of opinion, expression and peaceful assembly, which I think is what the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute was asking me to do. We also call on Iran to quash the prison sentences given to others for similar reasons.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet also raised the issue of freedom of expression for faith, as did one or two other colleagues. I met members of the Baha’i community in my office a few weeks ago, as I had met them a few years ago. I remain concerned, as does the House, about persecution of those of the Baha’i faith. We are concerned by state efforts to identify, monitor and arbitrarily detain Baha’is, and we will continue to raise that issue. As far as Iranian Christians are concerned, we also share the concerns about the continuing crackdown in Iran against religious minorities, including the house church movement mentioned by my right hon. Friend. Friend among Iranian Christians, and harassment of Muslims who convert to Christianity. The recent apparent crackdown on Christians for what appeared to be normal church activities, such as celebrating Christmas or holding a picnic—an important social activity at weekends in Iran, which we note has particular significance—is particularly concerning. We are not blind to those acts and we call on Iran to cease harassment of all religious minorities and to fulfil its international and domestic obligations to allow freedom of religion to all Iranians.

Colleagues mentioned women's rights. Women do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men in Iran and continue to face discrimination. Married women, as my right hon. Friend said, need the consent of their husbands to leave the country and can be banned from travelling abroad if their spouses do not sign the paperwork needed to obtain or renew a passport. Given that the President has expressed his desire to see greater justice in the country and to see human rights move forward, we hope that women's rights will also be high on the agenda. The discrimination they face is unacceptable in the 21st century, so we urge the Government of Iran to repeal discriminatory laws and enable women and girls to participate equally and contribute fully to society. We know about Iran's future—that is clearly in Iran's interest. All of us who know about Iranian society know that women are extremely valuable about what they believe they can contribute to society. They should be given full opportunity of expression.
We share the concern about continued persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Iran. Homosexual acts are criminalised in the Iranian penal code, and the punishment can range from 100 lashes to the death penalty for both men and women. It is also against Iranian law for people of the same sex to touch and kiss, and for people to cross-dress. There is no legal protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity in Iran, and there is widespread social intolerance of homosexuality.

Transsexuality in Iran has been legal since a fatwa was issued in 1987 by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. There is, however, still a great deal of social stigma attached to transsexuals, and they can obtain legal identification documents in their preferred gender only if they have undergone gender reassignment surgery. That makes it difficult for those who do not want to undergo surgery to find employment and access medical services and education. Again, we have repeatedly called on Iran to fulfil its international and domestic obligations to protect the human rights of all Iranians, and we continue to do so.

In conclusion, the Government share colleagues' concerns about the human rights situation in Iran.

Tom Brake: I raised the issue, which I hope the Minister will respond to in the last three minutes, of how the Government will ensure that human rights concerns are embedded in the cornucopia of trade deals that they will be negotiating.

Alistair Burt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for reminding me. The Government have repeatedly said, and I can say again here, that human rights considerations are not being, and will not be, sacrificed for trade deals. That is not the Government's intention, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East indicated from the Opposition Front Bench, and we have repeatedly said so. I can give that assurance to colleagues in the House today.

Bob Blackman: Before the Minister concludes, both my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and I raised the issue of the 1988 massacre, to which my right hon. Friend the Minister has not replied. Will he lead the campaign in the United Nations to get a proper report into that?

Alistair Burt: I stand by the letters that I have already signed off on that subject, which say that in our dealing with the issue of progress in Iran we do not at this stage plan to raise the 1988 executions at the UN or to support the inquiry. We are, however, working closely with the UN special rapporteur and we remain concerned about related issues that have come up. I have to say, however, that at present we do not have any intention to raise it specifically.

My hon. Friend also raised the matter of the NCRI, which I should refer to before I sit down. We do not have an official contact with it, and we do not endorse particular opposition groups in Iran. Choosing Iran's Government should be a matter for the Iranian people, and we remain of the view that we will not favour particular opposition groups in Iran.

Dr Offord: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: I want to conclude, because I think that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet needs a moment to speak as well. I thank colleagues for continuing to raise this matter. I hope that at the beginning of my remarks I gave a sense of how we are trying to deal with this difficult issue: we will continue to raise matters and we will not neglect them. Progress in Iran may well be slow, but we want it to be certain to fulfil what we believe are the hopes and desires of the Iranian people.

Theresa Villiers: I thank the Minister for his speech today. I very much take on board the complexity of the process, which he has described as not only holding the Iranian Government to account on their human rights record, but trying to guide them towards a better future on these matters.

The one point I would leave with him is that I hope he will look again at the issue of the 1988 mass killings. They happened, they were a terrible crime and not enough attention has been given to them. There is a strong case for an independent investigation and I hope that he and his colleagues in Government will give that their most serious consideration.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
HGV Driver Regulation

11 am

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of HGV drivers sleeping in their vehicles.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue, which is of great concern to hauliers and residents in my constituency. I will touch on three important and closely related aspects of this growing problem: first, how the regulations are enforced; secondly, the effect on my constituents of parking by heavy goods vehicles; and, thirdly, the lack of suitable off-street parking for HGVs in Kent.

One of the problems that British hauliers face is the lack of parity between the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe in the way in which the existing regulations are enforced. That disparity results in an indirect and unfair cost on British haulage companies operating in Europe, while providing an advantage to European companies operating in the United Kingdom.

It is illegal for drivers to spend their weekly rest period, otherwise known as their 45-hour rest period, in the cabin of their truck. Those who do not sleep in suitable accommodation are deemed not to have taken their rest, and fines can be levied against both the driver and the transport operator. That, however, is not being properly enforced here in the United Kingdom and, where enforcement action is taken, fines of only £300 are being issued.

Compare that with the much larger fines available to the authorities in other countries. In France, for example, lorry drivers can be fined as much as £26,000 if they are found sleeping in their cab by the side of the road. In May this year I understand that the Germans introduced a policy of fining drivers who are found taking their regular rest in the cabin of their lorry: £54 for every hour that they fail short of the necessary rest and £160 for the haulage operator.

Hauliers in my constituency are upset that EU-based operators use our lax enforcement of the 45-hour rest in the cabin of their truck. Those who do not sleep in suitable accommodation are deemed not to have taken their rest, and fines can be levied against both the driver and the transport operator. That, however, is not being properly enforced here in the United Kingdom and, where enforcement action is taken, fines of only £300 are being issued.

I am more than happy to agree with my hon. Friend. Friend on securing this debate. This issue does not only affect Kent. Travelling up to Staffordshire, HGVs can be found littering the roads, business parks and backstreets of towns, as he described. Does he agree that we need to look at the facilities provided for HGV drivers throughout the country? I appreciate the particular concerns in Kent, but they exist in other parts of the country too.

Gordon Henderson: I am more than happy to agree with my hon. Friend. Friend is a national issue, but she is right that we have a particular problem down in Kent, because we are the gateway to the country, so suffer far worse than anyone else. With regard to the facilities, I will come on to that, so I hope she will bear with me.

As I was saying, there are no washing facilities for drivers to use, and sites are often left littered, creating an expensive clean-up operation for the local authority. Even where parking restrictions apply, taking action is not always simple. When fines are imposed, they are often ignored by foreign drivers who simply do not pay them. In addition, where suitable parking facilities do exist—they are few and far between—the police simply do not have the resources to escort the lorries to those designated areas.

That brings me on nicely to my third concern, which is the lack of suitable off-street lorry parking and of the suitable facilities for drivers that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Gordon Henderson: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. Part of what I am saying is for the benefit not only of hauliers but of drivers, who deserve and should be given decent working conditions, including decent accommodation when they have their 45-hour rest.

On off-street parking, in November 2015, the then Chancellor announced a £250 million fund to provide a large lorry park alongside the M20 in Kent. Two years on, we have yet to see a single piece of tarmac laid.
I would be grateful if the Minister told me what discussions he has had with Kent County Council and what progress is being made to deliver that project.

One lorry park, however, no matter how large, is not the answer. That is why I very much hope that consideration is given to providing more localised solutions, such as the proposed lorry park near the Sheppey crossing in my constituency—a scheme I fully support. Such a lorry park, just off the A249—which, incidentally, is one of the busiest trunk roads in the south-east of England—would provide proper parking for the increasing number of HGVs that service the businesses in the area, which include two major regional retail distribution centres, a number of recycling plants, the largest paper mill in the UK, the thriving deep-water port at Sheerness and Eurolink, which is one of the largest industrial sites in southern England.

In summary, we should take a lead from our European neighbours and clamp down on the inappropriate parking of HGVs by properly enforcing the law on sleeping in cabs.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour on securing this debate and on making the case so strongly that the problem of lorry parking needs urgently to be addressed, across the country but especially in our area of Kent, for the sake of residents and lorry drivers. We must ensure that the parking of lorries in the right place is effectively enforced, and that has to go hand in hand with ensuring that there are places for lorries to park, such as the Operation Stack lorry park and further lorry parks on the route, which he mentioned.

Gordon Henderson: I fully agree. My hon. Friend mentioned enforcement; there should be an increase in fines for those who break the law and the police should be given more resources to assist the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency in issuing those fines. We should move quickly to provide the lorry parks needed in Kent and look seriously at local solutions, similar to the one on the A249 to which I referred. One way of achieving that would be to encourage local authorities to work with the private sector, which might feel more inclined to invest in a better lorry park network following a change in the enforcement regime.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I am from Aberdeenshire, where we have a £750 million bypass that goes round Aberdeen. I will ask Transport Scotland what they are doing about lorry parks, but does my hon. Friend think it would be better if lorry parks were charged for and had decent facilities?

Gordon Henderson: Existing lorry parks are chargeable, and I think that any future lorry parks will be chargeable. However, there is no point having a charge for a lorry park if there is no lorry park in the first instance. We are saying in Kent that we need more lorry parks, and I am sure that it is the same in Aberdeenshire.

The measures that I have outlined would have a number of long-term benefits, including eradicating the financial disadvantage for UK-based hauliers; removing parked HGVs from our residential streets and commercial areas; improving safety on our roads, particularly motorways and trunk roads; reducing the health hazard caused by HGV drivers dumping human waste and unsightly litter; and, last but not least, bringing long overdue relief to my constituents and those of other right hon. and hon. Members.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this debate on the important topic of the regulation of HGV drivers who sleep in their vehicles.

I am well aware of the scale of the challenges posed by the volume of lorry traffic in certain parts of the country, particularly Kent. We all know that road freight is a critical factor in the success of our economy, accounting for more than three quarters of all goods moved around the country. It is not just a direct enabler of economic activity but an important employer. Drivers alone—this does not speak to the rest of the haulage industry or the supply chain behind it—number something like 300,000 in this country. It is an important part of the UK economy. Alongside the industry, we as a Government must acknowledge the effects and the importance of that economic activity, and the way in which the industry interacts with other road users, communities and the general public, who have a stake in policy outcomes.

I shall address this topic in two ways. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who secured a previous debate about fly-parking, the negative effects of which are inevitably worsened by drivers sleeping in their cabs, because of the length of time involved.

We recognise that, in many cases, it is a perfectly acceptable option for a driver to spend a night in his or her vehicle. It is understandable that many drivers would prefer to spend a night in a sleeper cab—I discovered when I visited Keltruck in my constituency the other day that that can be a familiar and even comfortable place—rather than a cheap motel, a house in multiple occupation or other interim accommodation. However, although an overnight rest in the cab is a legitimate and established industry practice, we must draw the line somewhere. We are clear that it is not acceptable for a driver to take his or her full weekly rest—at least 45 hours—in the vehicle. Drivers should not spend an indefinite period driving and resting at their place of work—their lorry.

Hon. Members will be aware of the difficulty that the haulage industry is having recruiting new and, especially, young drivers. The Department is actively supporting it with that issue. Such practices do not support the industry’s efforts to convince young people that commercial driving is a good-quality job, a well-paid occupation worthy of their commitment and a good career choice.

Although HGVs parking in inappropriate locations, such as lay-bys, is always likely to be problematic in some respects—I will come to that question shortly—it is particularly troubling when they do so for 45 hours or
more. That amounts to a driver effectively living by the roadside, for the most part without even basic toilet facilities, for several days. That practice has obvious environmental impacts on local residents and other road users, and it places financial burdens on local authorities, which literally have to clean up the mess. I know that there have been such problems in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey and in lay-bys on the A249, not just because he said so, but because the Department has tracked those issues for some time.

The prohibition of that form of cab sleeping is also an important road safety measure. Mandatory weekly rest periods of 45 hours are a fundamental provision of the drivers’ hours rules, which guard against driver fatigue and seek to protect road safety. I am pleased to say that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency already has well-advanced plans to step up its enforcement activities to address that issue. From the first of next month, drivers caught taking their full weekly rest in their vehicles may be issued with a financial penalty of £300. Where appropriate, they may also be required to restart their weekly rest period, which we believe should be a significant deterrent to operators that are involved in such behaviour, since it will put contract delivery at risk, with potentially significant financial implications.

Enforcement officers will act proportionately. This is not about waking up drivers in the middle of the night where they are parked in proper facilities in a law-abiding way; it is about deterring problematic behaviour, particularly in certain areas. We will require the DVSA to join up with local police forces, including in Kent, as illegal cab sleeping often goes hand in hand with illegal parking. We recognise that employers, many of which are based overseas, as my hon. Friend mentioned—encourage their drivers to park up by the side of the road instead of paying for them to use proper facilities, as my hon. Friend said, so it is important that the DVSA also links up with its counterparts abroad to hold culpable operators to account. The DVSA's current risk-based system for assessing operators needs to be extended.

**Jesse Norman:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. The genius of the debate is not merely that it will create the genuine incentive to change. Of course, there must be alternatives available in a way that assists the drivers’ hours rules, which guard against driver fatigue and seek to protect road safety. I am pleased to say that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency already has well-advanced plans to step up its enforcement activities to address that issue. From the first of next month, drivers caught taking their full weekly rest in their vehicles may be issued with a financial penalty of £300. Where appropriate, they may also be required to restart their weekly rest period, which we believe should be a significant deterrent to operators that are involved in such behaviour, since it will put contract delivery at risk, with potentially significant financial implications.

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**Gordon Henderson:** While I welcome the trial, the Minister will recognise that clamping down on lorries on the A20 will just move them to the A2 and A249, which will probably exacerbate the problem in our area.

**Jesse Norman:** I recognise the point. The question really is not just whether the trial has that effect—that would be an important outcome—but whether, even adjusting for that, it has deterrent effects. Obviously, as successful as such measures may appear in a trial, they will work only if they can be rolled out across a locality. It will be a wider general enforcement power that will create the genuine incentive to change. Of course, there must be alternatives available in a way that assists the process, and I will come on to that shortly.

So far, I have mainly talked about enforcement-based responses to the problem. Much of this antisocial behaviour is in fact illegal and enforcement is therefore an appropriate and logical response. It is often the case that less responsible hauliers—many of them are based overseas, as my hon. Friend mentioned—encourage their drivers to park up by the side of the road instead of paying for them to use proper facilities. However, we must also recognise that such matters cannot be separated from the wider issue of the shortage of lorry facilities more generally. That point was rightly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Amanda Milling).

My predecessor directed a new survey to be undertaken to understand the scale of the issue. My Department will publish the results shortly, but I inform hon. Members that the situation appears to have become—as many knew or suspected—more acute since the last such survey was undertaken in 2011. It will come as no surprise to hon. Members who represent Kent that that county has again been identified as a hotspot for inappropriate parking, and that proper lorry parking facilities in that county are already largely at capacity. That is also the case in several other parts of the country. It is therefore clear that, in certain areas, enhanced enforcement must go hand in hand with more, and better quality, formal parking sites.

The information collected by the new survey will help local authorities to understand better the parking needs in their areas and, we hope, to make planning decisions...
accordingly. I know that Kent County Council is already investigating where additional provision is most needed in the county, and Highways England is working closely with it. I am also examining how the Government can best assist local authorities in encouraging additional provision of lorry parking more generally. I will inform the House of my intentions in that area in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey rightly raised Operation Stack, which is an important part of the Government’s planning. As he will be aware, the matter is currently the subject of a judicial review, which has slowed down the process and forced us to consider the interaction between the Stack elements and the wider issue of fly-parking more generally. We wish to resolve the whole thing on both sides in a satisfactory way, and we will make—and in due course announce to the House—plans for contingency arrangements to accommodate that. It is important that he realise that we also understand, as a separate matter, the importance of providing separate facilities irrespective of what transpires with Stack; I want to give him comfort in that regard.

We are undertaking essential contingency planning to cope with all eventualities, but we also need to recognise the issue more widely, in Kent and nationally. I thank my hon. Friend for this highly constructive debate, and I thank hon. Friends and colleagues across the House for their valuable contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am
Sitting suspended.

Royal Mail Delivery Office Closures

[Mike Gapes in the Chair]

2.30 pm
Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Royal Mail delivery office closures.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I was prompted to seek the debate because my constituency is threatened with the closure of two delivery offices, and I understand the impact that those closures will have on my constituents if they go ahead. I also want to highlight the wider pattern of delivery office closures, which affect not only my constituents but communities across the country, which I believe to be a direct, damaging consequence of the coalition Government’s decision to privatise Royal Mail in 2013.

Earlier this year, Royal Mail announced plans to close the West Norwood and East Dulwich delivery offices in my constituency. Since then, more than 1,000 local residents have contacted me to express their opposition to the closures, and many have also written to Royal Mail’s chief executive, Moya Greene. People from all walks of life have attended three public protests on the issue, among them wheelchair users, small business owners, home workers and many families and elderly residents who are keen to speak out on the impact that the loss of their local delivery office will have on them.

Royal Mail delivery offices are where the final stage in the mail sorting process takes place, the depots from which postal workers collect their rounds, and the front counter facilities where customers can collect parcels, recorded delivery mail and mail sent to a PO box address. Royal Mail argues that because a parcel can be left with a neighbour or have its delivery rescheduled, communities can manage without delivery offices, but there are many people for whom those options simply do not work, including those who work long hours; the many small business owners and sole traders who prefer to collect their mail from their local delivery office precisely because they can pick it up at a time of their choosing, allowing them to get on with other important meetings and errands rather than being tied inflexibly to a particular location; and people who simply do not have the time to be tied to their home just to wait for a delivery.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on calling this debate. Does she agree that often the most vulnerable people—elderly people and so on—who are restricted by problematic public transport such as a lack of buses are also hit hard by these closures?

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend’s intervention is well made. I will come on to talk about the impact that the closures will have on vulnerable constituents in my constituency and elsewhere.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she also agree that where offices are proposed for closure as part of wider regeneration plans, as is the case in my constituency in relation to Stretford sorting office, it is important that new public facilities are considered as part of that regeneration?
Helen Hayes: It is a problem across the country that where delivery offices are being closed, the receipts from the sale of that land are recouped entirely for the benefit of shareholders and not reinvested in alternative facilities for customers.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I concur with the congratulations to my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she recognise that when Royal Mail argues, as it has in the case of the proposed closure of the Holbeck delivery office in my constituency, that it will “improve facilities for our customers in the LS11 postcode area”, that kind of comment provokes a hollow laugh on the part of residents who will have to travel much further, taking in some cases not one but two buses to pick up a part of residents who will have to travel much further, “improve facilities for our customers in the LS11 postcode area”, not an argument for forcing residents to travel longer distances to collect their mail.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing a very important issue to the House. I apologise that I will have to leave early—I have already apologised to the Chair and Minister. The hon. Lady refers to parcel services. A large number of constituents do not have access to the internet or computers or may not be computer literate. Therefore, when it comes to arranging delivery, they cannot use the alternatives of parcel lockers or click and collect. Does she feel that Royal Mail has not been fair to its bread-and-butter customers who have kept it going all these years?

Helen Hayes: The hon. Gentleman’s point is well made. I will come on to data that clearly prove that it is the overwhelming preference of customers to have parcels delivered to their home and not to any other location.

The much longer journeys will clearly be even more challenging for older people, disabled residents and those with very small children. As one of my constituents—a 77-year-old pensioner who cares full-time for her disabled adult daughter—has described in a letter to Moya Greene,

“this journey would be exhausting but since I do not drive and I am unable to afford a taxi, there would be no alternative to it.”

Royal Mail has argued that a need for modernisation is driving the changes, but when I visited the West Norwood delivery office during the very busy Christmas peak period it was clear that it is a modern, efficient working environment. The staff are dedicated and hard-working, and they provide an excellent service to their customers.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. She speaks of distance. Does she agree that there will be a massive problem across rural Britain if this goes ahead? Royal Mail is supposed to be here to serve us, but on this it is not doing so.

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention. The issue of distance applies in rural areas, but in urban areas congestion and journey time rather than distance are the impediment to accessibility. Her point is well made.

The issue is far from unique to my constituency. Between the privatisation of Royal Mail in October 2013 and May 2017, 142 delivery offices—10% of the network—have been closed, and more offices are at risk of closure. Royal Mail has sold more than £200 million worth of property and it is expected to receive at least a further £500 million of receipts shortly. At the same time, it has paid out more than £800 million in dividends, with an annual dividend now running at more than £220 million. Its chief executive is paid an annual package worth £1.9 million.

Concerns were raised time and time again by Labour MPs during the passage of the Postal Services Act 2011 under the coalition Government that privatisation would place the motive of delivering profits for shareholders at the heart of the organisation and that that would...
drive down the quality of service for Royal Mail customers and compromise terms and conditions for staff. The Government argued that that would not happen, because the investment funds Royal Mail would be able to access as a consequence of privatisation would be significant, but that is exactly what has happened.

There is no doubt that the postal delivery market is extremely competitive and that Royal Mail is operating in a difficult context, but it is far from clear that Royal Mail’s approach makes good business sense. In addition to providing facilities for mail collection, delivery offices are the depots from which postal workers begin their rounds. Fewer delivery offices mean that postal workers will have further to travel from their base to their rounds, resulting in mail deliveries taking place later in the day.

Among Royal Mail’s customers there is demand for high-quality delivery services, in part fuelled by the continued growth in online shopping, which means that while the number of letters delivered has reduced, the number of parcels delivered is still growing every year. A recent Ofcom survey found that 70% of people still prefer their parcels to be delivered to their home, rather than to work or a click and collect facility. While many competitors offer increasingly short delivery time slots, Royal Mail services in many areas are becoming later, less predictable and therefore less convenient.

Royal Mail was privatised in a shambolic fashion. The coalition Government rushed through the privatisation, with the then Chancellor desperate for funds to prop up his failing austerity agenda. In their rush to sell, the Government grossly underestimated the value of Royal Mail, with its shares jumping 38% on the first day of trading and the taxpayer losing out to the tune of an estimated £1 billion, according to the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. The Committee also set out how the Government failed to reap the benefits of the sale of Royal Mail assets included in the privatisation package. The Government ignored National Audit Office advice to remove those assets, notably the network of delivery offices, from the privatisation deal or to add clawback provisions on the future sale of properties. The Government valued three London sites at around £200 million, when the NAO thought they could be worth anywhere between £330 million and £830 million.

Royal Mail continues to sell sites across London at eye-watering prices, to no taxpayer benefit and with no reinvestment in its services to customers. I should be clear, however, that Royal Mail is mistaken if it believes that its site in West Norwood is a potentially lucrative housing site. The site is situated in Lambeth Council’s key industrial and business area, or KIBA, which provides strong protection to employment land uses. There is no possibility that Royal Mail will be able to sell that site for housing.

The Government also failed to define the universal service obligation beyond mail delivery, to secure an appropriate geographical distribution of delivery offices and the time and frequency of deliveries for the future. As a consequence, the social contract at the heart of Royal Mail’s relationship with the communities it serves has been broken. The organisation is orientated only toward profits, while at the same time alienating its workforce with a damaging attack on staff pensions and other terms and conditions. It is not acceptable that pensioners and disabled people in my constituency should have to travel an hour each way to collect their mail while £800 million is distributed to shareholders and the chief executive of Royal Mail is paid almost £2 million a year.

I call on the Government to recognise the scale of the problem, the aggressive approach that Royal Mail is taking to the disposal of its land assets and the total disregard that the organisation is showing for the customers and communities it was created to serve. If no action is taken, our postal delivery service will continue to be decimated and vulnerable residents, disabled people, parents with small children and small business owners will lose out the most. Privatisation is not working for Royal Mail’s customers or for postal workers, and it is time for the Government to take action. A Labour Government would take Royal Mail back into public sector ownership and replace profit with public service at the heart of the organisation.

Will the Minister commit to take action to safeguard delivery offices and the services that communities across the country rely on, and intervene to regulate Royal Mail? Will the Minister also support my urgent call on Royal Mail to scrap its closure plans in West Norwood and East Dulwich, and ensure that its vital services remain accessible to my constituents in SE27 and SE22, and across the country?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): We have limited time for the debate. I would be grateful if any speeches could be relatively brief, so that everybody gets in.

2.45 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Thank you for letting me speak in this important debate, Mr Gapes. I pay tribute to the Communication Workers Union, whose members feel strongly about this matter, and have voted overwhelmingly to strike in protection of their pay and pensions.

Since the privatisation of Royal Mail in October 2013, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said, 142 delivery offices have closed. That is 10% of the network. Thankfully, my delivery office in Hartlepool is not one of them, but with closures happening at such a pace, I wonder when it will be our turn. The impact of a delivery office closure on the public is immense. Losing them not only deprives people of a local place to go to collect their parcels or undelivered post, but often means they must commute to the next town or beyond to access a service that all of us rely on at some point.

The Royal Mail is able to make these changes because the provision of delivery offices is not regulated. As we found with the closure of our central post office in Hartlepool earlier this year, a short consultation is often followed by swift closure. There are implications for pay and pensions in those closures, as there were in that closure and in the transfer of staff to WHSmith. The current CWU dispute is about fighting the introduction of an inferior pension scheme and a below-inflation pay offer. People rely on a delivery office being close to hand. The programme of managed decline needs to be stopped before any more damage is done, more jobs are lost and more communities lose these important assets.
2.46 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Thank you for allowing me to speak, Mr Gapes. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for bringing the debate to Westminster Hall. Mike Weir, my predecessor for Angus, worked hard on the issue of closures of local post offices and it seems entirely fitting that I speak with that in mind. We are fortunate in this country to have the Royal Mail operating as the UK’s designated universal service provider, making sure that six days per week we still get our post, no matter how rural our homes. Being from Angus myself, I know full well how remote some of those households can be.

Without a doubt, the delivery sector faces increased pressures, as demand drops and competitors such as TNT, DPD, Yodel and, of course, Amazon seek to break into the market. In addition, as alternative, faster and cheaper forms of communication become more established and, indeed, essential to more people and organisations, it will not be easy for the Royal Mail to continue with business as usual.

While I am not aware of a specific number of closures planned in my constituency, I will monitor the situation closely to ensure that each major town—Forfar, Kirriemuir, Brechin, Montrose and Arbroath—is looked out for. Each of those delivery offices provides a source of employment, which is vital in my constituency with its higher than average unemployment level. It is also an important local service, which no one with Angus’s interests in mind wants to see weakened or reduced.

However, I am encouraged by a recent example from just over the county’s border in Carnoustie. While it was disappointing that the Carnoustie office closed in June 2016, the positive to take from that closure is that services were transferred to the nearby Dundee east office and no job losses were incurred. I absolutely appreciate the concern that even when jobs are protected there is still a risk to the local economy, as staff may move away and take businesses with them. Furthermore, as previous hon. Members have mentioned, we must never forget how dependent the public in a rural area such as Angus are on those offices. People who rely on public transport or who are disabled could well face tougher journeys to reach larger, more centralised delivery offices. My promise to my constituents is that I will always seek to protect their interests in these matters and make sure that Angus residents get the best services possible.

2.49 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing the debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

If a post office fails, a lot of people are in trouble. The slash-and-burn approach to closing scores of outlets across Scotland and the UK is nothing short of a disgrace. Public opinion has been ignored and a blind eye turned to the needs of our communities. Crown post offices are being closed down and replaced by counters in stores. The House of Commons Library analysis shows that in Scotland there are now 1,403 post offices, down from 1,904 in 2002.

Those who work with vulnerable groups have highlighted the damaging effect that the closures will have on the elderly, disabled and unemployed. The picture I see is of a fast disappearing network, leaving Scottish citizens, especially in the more isolated communities, stranded. Some of the most remote parts of the country are among the hardest hit, with about half the above-mentioned branches in the sparsely populated highlands and islands of Scotland, where residents most need them. Tory cuts to local post offices threaten the economic wellbeing and the social fabric of local communities all over the country and need to be stopped. Hundreds of jobs will be lost across the country and workers’ rights eroded. The Communication Workers Union has revealed that the post office network has been reduced by more than 50% over the past three decades.

The Post Office claims that there is good public transport and people can simply “get on their bike”—to coin a phrase—and find another one, but that is a triumph of imagination over fact. For many, the cull of this vital network means that there is no longer a meeting point where they can easily collect their pensions or have access to the advice and support on a range of issues that their local office offers. It is a human touch that goes beyond just stamps and letters. To suggest that there are always easy bus routes or that vulnerable people can simply jump on public transport to another town is out of touch, to put it mildly. This Government seem to know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

In my constituency of Falkirk, within the existing delivery office is the main post office counter. Yes, we have sub-post offices in the town but the future of that office, which serves the local businesses and communities well in the town centre, is in jeopardy. So far, there is no clear indication of what will happen to that counter if the delivery office closes. Can I have an answer to the delivery office closing in Falkirk? Have communities or council been consulted? How does a small sub-post office deal with parcels? There are so many questions about the future of that delivery office and post office counter. There has been a total lack of information for the public; there have been no details of future plans, including on the use of the existing building.

The same seems to apply across a host of other towns and communities. A reply that I received from a fellow Scottish MP, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), a CWU member, confirmed that uncertainty about the future and a lack of any decision information being communicated.

A very clear concern is that some offices allow foreign students to use the Home Office biometric enrolment service. Does that transfer across to other offices? Is there a plan to ensure that that service will be protected? In Falkirk, a large number of overseas students use the local Forth Valley College, which will benefit from an £82 million investment to build a brand-new college. Surely a service for overseas students such as that should be introduced where needed and protected when in place.

As usual with this Government, there is far too much uncertainty. Is the problem planned mismanagement failure or sheer incompetence? People can make up their own mind, but I know one thing: these short-term policies have been practised for far too long. While the UK Government preach to us about building a shared society, the destruction of yet another public service shows that we are reaching the point where we will have little left to share.
Post Office bosses say that franchising will keep services “where customers want and need them”, but I cannot see how that can be the case when public opinion seems not to have been considered. The Tory Government have to take responsibility and set out a proper strategy for the Post Office. The public as well as the local businesses that rely on the post office have a right to expect more than this managed decline. For many people, the post office is a lifeline, and the steady closures that we have seen over recent years raise serious questions about whether many of these communities will ever have a branch again.

2.54 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to speak in a debate considering the future of our post offices. This consideration is happening at a time when a wider struggle within Royal Mail is taking place. I speak today in support of my hon. Friend’s comments on post office closures, and of the men and women across the country in this sector. I am a CWU member and supporter of its four pillars campaign, which seeks, as we have heard, improvements to pensions, pay, conditions and the business vision in Royal Mail more widely.

It is not just post office closures but the wider context that we are minded to consider. Across the service, post offices close, with consequences for local communities. There is a policy on open vacancies which leaves positions unfilled to save on costs. For postal workers I know, staff shortages lead to a workload that is too great and pressures that have consequences for health and life outside work. The workload increases and will continue to do so with post office closures, while the hours to complete the job are reduced and the pressure to take on the workload without extra hours is ramped up. Let us not confuse choosing overtime with being overworked.

My constituency towns of Bury, Tottington and Ramsbottom want Royal Mail to look after their postal workers and value their post offices. Those men and women work long hours—ever-changing hours—doing physical work to deliver items that we deem important to send or receive. They enrich our communities and play an important part in keeping our towns, cities and economies running. With industrial action now planned—it was voted for by a huge 89.1% of the members—the dispute will spill out into the consciousness of the wider public and, I hope, sharpen minds as to the threat to postal services more widely. If it does not do that, the threat of a High Court battle certainly will, and I think news of that will be met with sympathy.

The cause and the proposed way forward outlined by the CWU is fair and righteous. Royal Mail has a fight on its hands. Workers inside Royal Mail are fighting, but outside it matters, too. They are fighting for an economy that works for everyone, for the emergent gig economy to undermine workers’ rights and force many hard-working employees into uncertain terms and conditions and precarious work over the past decade?

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I associate myself with all the comments made by hon. Members about Royal Mail closures. Does my hon. Friend agree that the companies that he mentions have taken advantage of the gig economy to undermine workers’ rights and force many hard-working employees into uncertain terms and conditions and precarious work over the past decade?

James Frith: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and absolutely agree with her comments. In the struggle at Royal Mail, we see the argument being made by the workers for an economy that does not deny or prevent profits paying for public services, but argues, as I do, that workers and business models are not just assets to be sweated for maximum immediate gain. We are talking about industry that provides good employment and good career prospects, with development, investment and good profit, which is not exploitative—a sustainable business for the future. Towns such as mine still have the rows of terraced houses built by employers for their workers in a different age. That age has passed of course, but it was an example of employers looking after their workforce and not complaining of high turnover of staff or sick rates without connecting poor working practices, which they determine, to those issues.

I am talking about short-sighted commercial ideals. It is not too much to expect that postal workers in my region and staff in post offices elsewhere should be well paid, can save for retirement and can trust the leadership of the organisation to step up to the opportunities that a changing economy brings.

The repeal Bill going through Parliament will challenge assumptions that we have as a country about working practices that we take for granted. Those measures were bombarde on the way into law and will be under attack as they are transferred across from the EU statute book, too. I am talking about health and safety at work, working conditions and treatment of staff, employed or self-employed. The ever more likely US-made models of employment that we see can undermine working conditions for millions of people trying to make ends meet if we do not argue for a settlement that works for all.

I support the plan, which does not ignore business needs and does not ignore the pressures that Royal Mail is under. A costed plan was submitted by the CWU with the backing of its members that included the appliance of risk to a pension pot to be put on the members of the pension scheme and away from the company. It is worth noting that at this point that for 11 years Royal Mail did not contribute to the pension pot, while its workers continued to do so and, as has been mentioned, it is on course to take £1 billion out of the business while post offices close.

I support the responsible approach taken by the union and its understanding of the pressures the company is under, but Royal Mail has picked up the bits of the plan that work for it, and stripped that of its balancing qualities. The gain has been reframed but the pain has been retained. Royal Mail should be setting standards in this sector for the future, not dismissing the workers’ proposals to introduce wider scope for post offices and postal workers. A postal worker’s role can expand as per the workers’ plans. I know that there is enthusiasm among Royal Mail workers to broker a future as a unionised workforce, sharing the interests of growth, helping deliver it, in the certainty that they have a place in it and a share in its rewards.
Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the Commons. We did not hear the bell here, but there is a green light flashing, so we suspend for 15 minutes; obviously, if there are two Divisions we suspend for 30 minutes.

3.1 pm
Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

3.48 pm
On resuming—

James Frith: I conclude my remarks. [Laughter.] Thank you, Mr Gapes, for letting me speak under your chairmanship and I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for securing this debate.

3.49 pm
Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this debate. The attendance both before and after the Divisions, which were an interruption of our discussion this afternoon, really shows that there is significant interest in this issue right across the House.

Of course, mail services are incredibly important to the public, whether for sending personal items, gifts or communications. They are also important for our economy. The rise in online shopping is important; for retailers the public, whether for sending personal items, gifts or postwoman calls, being able to collect a parcel locally or postwoman calls, being able to collect a parcel locally in which they live, at a time that worked for them, to pick up a parcel while running other errands. That adds a layer of convenience for customers who would previously have had to go to their local delivery office in the town in which they live, at a time that worked for them, to pick up a parcel while running other errands.

Given that people are often not in when the postman or postwoman calls, being able to collect a parcel locally is important. The move will also potentially have negative consequences for staff, and not just in terms of the base moving and the longer journeys, so I want Royal Mail to guarantee that it will not be used to undermine existing jobs in the Bishopbriggs office. There should be guarantees for those workers.

I want to pick up on the Royal Mail’s claim that no inconvenience will be caused; I share the concern of the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood about how it proposes to deal with this issue. It says that it can deliver to other addresses or on a different day. Some individuals have a good relationship with a neighbour whom they know will always be in, so that can certainly work well, but not everybody is in that situation, and the neighbour may be out when the delivery arrives.

Delivery on a different day sometimes makes sense. It might be fine if someone who works Monday to Friday and is out when Royal Mail tries to deliver a parcel on Thursday says, “Can you deliver it on Saturday?”, but for many people that is inconvenient. Royal Mail ought to be thinking much more proactively, even if some closures do go ahead. I certainly hope that it will think again in the case of Bishopbriggs. Given that it is looking at the issue, it ought to be more proactive in looking at networks of local collection points. That could be of benefit not only in areas where there are potential changes to delivery offices, but much more widely.

I am aware of a programme called Royal Mail local collect, which I understand is fairly new, whereby local post offices can be used and chosen as a collection point. That has its merits, as far as it goes, but it seems to me that that option can be chosen only when making the online purchase. If Royal Mail has that system already in place, why can it not be offered as an option to people who are not in when the delivery arrives? Instead of choosing for it to be delivered on a different day or to a different address, they could choose for it to be delivered to their local post office. That would be helpful not only in places where delivery offices close, but for many people in rural communities, which the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) mentioned.

Many people will have a post office that is much closer to where they live than their nearest delivery office. That is an obvious potential solution that has not been properly explored. Clearly, there would be some cost to Royal Mail, and there would be a potential income stream for the Post Office, which I am sure it would welcome and would help it improve its sustainability. The relationship between post offices and the Royal Mail has been strong over many years, so it strikes me that that really ought to be explored further. Although there might be a cost to the Post Office, it is important to note that there is, of course, a cost to every failed delivery that Royal Mail tries to undertake.

I appreciate that other hon. Members want to speak and that we have been slightly waylaid by Divisions. I have been raising these issues with Royal Mail and I hope that the Minister will do likewise. The Government have sold off the last public stake in the Post Office—the 30%, which I think should still have been maintained because the Government should have a public stake in Royal Mail. None the less, the Minister still has influence and is able to meet with Royal Mail’s senior management. I very much hope that she will take these points, and the others that have been made in this debate, strongly and forcefully to Royal Mail.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I inform Members that this debate will conclude at 4.48 pm, because we have injury time. There are three Front-Bench speeches and two Back-Bench speeches, so we have until about 4.18 pm before we have to start the Front-Bench speeches.

3.56 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I will be as brief as I can. I worked for Royal Mail and am still employed there—I am on a five-year career break—and I am proud to be a Communication Workers Union member. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for calling this debate and ensuring that as many Members know about this issue as possible.

This is an important debate for me. I spent 27 years working for Parcelforce—I am still employed by it—delivering in and around my constituency, which I am now fortunate enough to represent here in Westminster. In fact, when I chat on doorsteps, I simply ask local people to keep letting me deliver for them—this time in Westminster rather than in the villages and rural areas around Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill.

This debate is not just important for me; it is important for everyone in this country, from Land’s End to John O’Groats. I spoke out against and challenged the privatisation of Royal Mail by the coalition Government. I was here at the time campaigning; my name is mentioned three times in Hansard. I was really involved in this debate. It is very hard for me to accept some of the stuff that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) said, because the Lib Dems made many bad decisions during those five years. Inconvenience—Royal Mail was not for sale. It should never have been sold, and I cannot help but remind colleagues that it was taken through this House by the Lib Dems’ current leader. I will not name him, but I will not forget him.

It will not be a surprise to Members who follow me on Twitter and know a little about me that I am a proud member of the Communication Workers Union. My focus is on Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, but I very much view part of my role in this House as standing up for workers in this country—in particular, our postmen, people on zero-hours contracts and every single working person in this country who is being treated wrongly in my eyes.

Since Royal Mail was privatised in 2013 until May 2017, 142 delivery offices have been closed. That amounts to losing 10% of the network in just three and a half years. Disgracefully, more offices are now slated for closure as Royal Mail looks to implement a wide-ranging and unwanted cost-cutting programme. These closures mean something. They have an impact; they change people’s lives for the worse. I cannot understand how closing delivery centres can be defended when we know the impact that will have on older people, those with disabilities and mobility issues, and those without a car.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned that letters are in decline and yes, letters are declining, but the fact that a privatised Royal Mail could make the changes because the provision of delivery offices and collection points is not regulated. It can do what it wants, without question—perhaps the Minister will take that up for us and have a look.

The changes and the resulting problems are affecting all parts of our country. My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) has been working with his community to stop the closure in Gullane.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Just to explain, when the bank branch in Gullane, East Lothian, was closed, the bank held up the post office as the answer to all the problems. Unfortunately, because of an illness, the post office closed, though only temporarily. However, that temporary closure continues, apart from two hours a week when the post office is in the village hall. That is unsatisfactory for the community and is tearing the heart out of the high street. It needs to be stopped. There is a responsibility to communities.

Hugh Gaffney: That is happening up and down the country—or else the banks are meant to replace the post offices, but the banks and the post offices are all shutting down. Need I say more? Instead, let us open another betting shop, another place to gamble money away or treat people wrongly with charity shops.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) has been leading a campaign against closures in her part of north London, a campaign that has developed a real following in print and social media, because people are fed up. Those are just some examples of what is happening, and we have heard many more, including from the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally). I thank him for that.

I cannot speak today without mentioning the Royal Mail dispute that has been in the media recently. It will continue to be in the media. For those who do not know, 110,000 postal workers in Royal Mail were balloted on whether they supported taking industrial action—110,000 people up and down the length and breadth of this country, United Kingdom workers who check our letter boxes every single day, in all kinds of weather, six days a week, with a universal service obligation or USO to do that. That is what the Royal Mail got when we privatised it.

Millions have fought and died for the rights of workers and working people, and it is the right of all of us to withdraw our labour if the right terms and conditions are not in place.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman just mentioned the Royal Mail dispute. Does he agree that the results of the ballot, which easily surpassed the restrictions imposed by the Tory anti-trade-union Act, show the depth of feeling of the Royal Mail workforce?

Hugh Gaffney: Totally. This is all about anti-trade-union laws and workers again being treated the wrong way. A yes vote of 89.1% on a turnout of 73.7% suggests that the country is standing up to the Government and saying, “Enough is enough!” Every community should support our postal workers because they are doing their best. They are only human beings, working-class people, doing their best and serving their communities every single day—support them.
I hope that a strong, collective and loud voice will be heard loudly and clearly not only by Members in this House but by Royal Mail bosses—I know you are listening and, if you are, come and join us, sit at the table, look us in the eye and talk. The postal workers do not want to go on strike; they want a deal, and a deal can be done. That is all we are asking for.

What are the postal workers going on strike for? Pensions. Royal Mail announced changes to pension agreements that will see thousands of working people stand to lose up to 45% of their entitlement. People are living longer, so how dare they? It beggars belief to make changes that will see people thousands of pounds worse off in retirement. That is what the strike is about. It is not just about the pay—they were due a pay rise in April this year, but no rise came. Four pillars are mentioned, but pensions is the thing we are talking about, because they are attacking workers.

While workers got no pay rise in April, chief executive officer Moya Greene—listen to this, Moya—received a 23% increase in her pay package and took home almost £2 million. Is that the country we live in now? Moya, you have been asked to go to the table—go to the table, sit down and talk to the workers. How can Royal Mail not want to invest in and support its workforce? How can it not do that? We have just heard those figures, and Royal Mail’s failure reflects the wider issues we have in this country—working people are suffering and it will only get worse unless we see my right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for securing the debate. This join me.

there—everyone is more than welcome to come and to the High Court, but the CWU will be there tomorrow, our United Kingdom. I condemn the Royal Mail for going for the future of the service and, importantly, for the laws—we play by the book, we get the result, but Royal Mail has decided on immediate legal action. We are going to the High Court tomorrow. That is what we receive for the high result despite the anti-trust union laws—we play by the book, we get the result, but Royal Mail still wants to go to the High Court.

The CWU is not afraid of debate and mediation. It is committed to finding the best way forward for its members, for the future of the service and, importantly, for the millions of people across the four nations that make up our United Kingdom. I condemn the Royal Mail for going to the High Court, but the CWU will be there tomorrow, at 10.30 am, and I hope to join our CWU members there—everyone is more than welcome to come and join me.

Finally, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for securing the debate. This is such an important issue, not only for Royal Mail workers and the ordinary people of this country, but for everyone. We are not going down the way, we want their pay up the way.

4.7 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing it. It is a fantastic debate.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) for a fantastic speech. Many on the Opposition Benches hope that his five-year career break will be a lot longer than five years. We need to hear his voice in this place, and it is a privilege to speak after him.

One of the key reasons why Opposition Members are opposed to the privatisation of national public assets such as Royal Mail is that we see no benefit for the country as a whole, just a benefit for a small handful of individuals who profit at the expense of the many. The number of Labour MPs who have turned out for this debate is instructive, while the sterile turnout on the Government Benches is a tumbleweed turnout—no one to speak up for the Government side, except of course for the Minister.

The British post has been one of the best in the world for almost two centuries: fast, reliable and much cheaper than that of nearly other country in the world. Also, it is—or was—a technological leader. It is widely envied throughout the world, not least because it has been a key historical driver in the UK economy.

When we opposed privatisation, we did so because we predicted that the only things it would lead to would be a worse service to the public and, as usual, the resulting extra profits being siphoned off by the usual small, self-seeking minority. I have to say that it looks like that is exactly what has happened. I will not go into the details, which we heard from Members earlier, because time is pressing.

I will say, however, that as the service is being squeezed, assets are literally being flogged off, with £200 million in property sales since privatisation. Fat dividend payouts to shareholders are estimated at £1 billion over the four years post-privatisation, and there have been the huge pay rises for senior managers for whom the word “privatisation” is like the word “Christmas” for a five-year-old. In 2016-17, Royal Mail’s chief executive, Moya Greene—I think my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill told her, poignantly, to get her arse to the negotiating table and negotiate with the CWU—saw her total pay package increase by 23% to £1.9 million. I could not even begin to think about how to spend that.

The Conservative party likes to present itself as the party of business, the real world and responsibility, but in reality it is the complete opposite. It has taken a key component of a modern manufacturing economy, which is already a world leader in its field in nearly all measures, and has undermined it and hollowed it out to skim off short-term profits and shower them like confetti on a small, self-seeking minority. It has achieved much of that by chipping away at the quality of service and flogging off assets for one-time profit hits. The other obvious target for the vulture capitalists and asset strippers is the rights of the workforce, with attacks on pensions, pay and agreements.

On pensions, there is a new scheme that, according to Royal Mail’s own pension trustees, will produce pensions so small that Royal Mail pensioners will live in poverty. Who will make up the living standards of those workers? Other taxpayers, naturally. Once again, the management of a privatised asset have transferred costs on to the shoulders of us ordinary taxpayers and shovelled the profits into their own pockets. We can be pretty sure that plenty of that profit will find its way out of the country and to the spivvy tax havens of the rich, where it will be of almost no benefit to this country’s economy.
On pay, I have already mentioned Moya Greene’s generous offer to herself of a 23% pay increase this year. What has she offered her workers? A below-inflation pay offer. Let us call that what it is: a pay cut.

On industrial agreements, there has been an attempt to ram through huge alterations to agreements reached with workers through the CWU. Let us be clear: Royal Mail is reneging on its deals. It has already been mentioned that, unsurprisingly, when balloted on strike action, on a 73% turnout, 89% of Royal Mail workers voted for strike action. That is as clear a mandate as any decision ever gets, and in a healthy work culture it is a clear signal to management to start re-thinking their policies. But that is not where we are. Instead, management have merely threatened legal action against their employees—a bully-boy tactic that they are unlikely to use because they fear the cost of their likely defeat in court.

What my constituents want, and what the country needs, is not macho posturing by Royal Mail management. Nor do we need to see them handing one another more fat-cat bonuses and closing down more services. The actions of companies like Royal Mail affect all of us and none of us can ignore them, even if we wish to. That means that management need to consider their social licence to operate—the consent that the people, through their elected representatives, give them to operate. I believe that they have lost it. Without that, they do not have a right to be there and to do what they are doing to Royal Mail.

On resuming—

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this important debate.

Any uncertainty that affects our postal services causes alarm, because our post offices and Royal Mail are institutions that are still held in much affection and esteem, despite the politics that sadly so often swallows them up. Royal Mail is special, because it has a unique position in the United Kingdom postal market as the universal service provider and it is by far the largest operator in that market. Consumers want and employees need Royal Mail to give full details of planned closures and the scale of any planned job losses.

Importantly, absolute cast-iron guarantees are needed that any closures will not affect the delivery of the universal service obligation, which we all hold dear. Telling the public that the number of facilities is to reduce is not the same as being clear and open about the overall plans. We need to see a full list of offices and timescales of proposed closures. We are all concerned about piecemeal reductions in this key network, as a major public service provider. We need to know what we are dealing with and to have a detailed plan in front of us.

These measures could be particularly alarming for Scotland. I urge Royal Mail to factor the geographical spread of delivery offices, not just the volumes of mail, into any analysis of proposals to close delivery offices.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way; this has been a disjointed debate and I fear that we might have another Division soon, so I want to make this point in case I am not able to return for the closing speeches.

On locations, the Minister will recall that, in the last debate on this issue, I placed particular emphasis on the effect on deprived areas. She said that she would look into that. Does the hon. Lady hope, as I do, that the Minister will refer to the effect on deprived areas across the United Kingdom?

**Patricia Gibson**: Indeed; I would expect socio-economic and geographical factors to feature largely in Royal Mail’s considerations and in the Minister’s response.

The figures that we have heard today show that parcel delivery services are a huge part of our economy and are very important to Royal Mail. Indeed, increased parcel delivery was cited as one of the main reasons that Royal Mail’s annual profit rose by 25% this year. We know that parcels are frequently delivered when recipients are at work or otherwise not at home, so trips to delivery offices need to be manageable and realistic, and those offices need to be accessible, particularly in rural areas.

**Mike Gapes (in the Chair)**: Order. We have another Division. If there are two or three, I am afraid we will have to come back later, but I hope that there will be just one, in which case we will return in 15 minutes. If the Front Benchers are here before then, I will start the closing speeches straight away.

4.31 pm

**Patricia Gibson**: Given the growth in the online parcel economy and the digital economy, and given the importance of parcel delivery in general and to the Royal Mail in particular, it seems odd that Royal Mail delivery offices face cuts and closures. Digital connectivity is very important to our economy and parcel delivery has grown enormously—it is soaring, in fact—due to our increasingly large digital marketplace. According to Ofcom, in 2015-16 almost 2 billion parcels were delivered, which is an average of 30 parcels per head of population in one year. Any closures must not disproportionately affect our rural communities, which could be hit very hard by ill-considered decisions on closures.

However, I cannot help feeling that today we are simply bemoaning and lamenting the symptoms of the ill-judged decision to privatise Royal Mail in the first place. Many of us predicted that such privatisation would lead to a reduction in postal services in rural areas, and over the last four years that certainly seems to have been borne out, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk.

The Tories and Lib Dems, having formed the coalition, were part of the decision-making process to privatise the Royal Mail. I wonder today whether they regret that decision; perhaps the Minister can tell us. Sadly and regrettably, under the last Labour Government we had to endure the rolling programme of post office closures that hit my own constituency very hard indeed. Wiser people than I have stated categorically that the Royal Mail was sold off for far less than it was worth.
Ultimately, the very future of our delivery service is at stake and I fear that the universal service provision is under real threat. I also fear for the future of the entire estate and the public service that it provides. As the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) has pointed out, there is the prospect of the first national strike since Royal Mail was privatised. Royal Mail workers have voted massively in favour of a walkout in a bitter dispute over pensions, pay and jobs. Of course, industrial action was backed by a huge 89% on a turnout of 73% of the 110,000 members of the Communication Workers Union who were balloted, passing even the UK Government’s threshold for strike action under the terms of the Trade Union Act 2017, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

Significantly, the unions believe that there has been a “relentless programme of cost-cutting to maximise short-term profits and shareholder returns”, creating a climate of fear and insecurity in Royal Mail. As outlined by the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith), that situation has not been helped by the prospect or threat of legal action to prevent the impending strike from taking place at all.

I hope that we all agree that there is real cause for concern about the future of the entire Royal Mail service, and I urge management and unions to work together to ensure its future. In addition, I urge the Minister to use her good offices to the fullest extent for a positive future for our Royal Mail.

4.34 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this debate. Her campaign to fight for the future of the local delivery offices in her constituency is inspirational; she made Royal Mail stop and reconsider what seemed like an inevitable closure. I commend her for standing up for good local postal services for her community and for a certain future for postal workers. I would like to mention the many contributions by hon. Members from both sides of the House—in particular, the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who was the only Member representing the Conservative party.

Last week, CWU members sent a clear message to Royal Mail when they voted by a momentous number—almost 90%—in favour of strike action in defence of their job security, their pensions and the future of the service. Defying the draconian Trade Union Act 2016 and attempts to quell the power of unions to demand better workers’ rights, the stunning vote was a clear mandate for a strike. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) went into that very eloquently so I will not dwell on it, but I am extremely disappointed to say the least by the Royal Mail’s approach to the ongoing dispute with CWU members. It showed the workers very little respect, but, as always, defended Moya Greene’s right to earn almost £2 million per annum, which in my view is completely obscene. The Royal Mail has now escalated the dispute to the High Court. We await that decision tomorrow, but I think it should have honoured the decisive result in the ballot. I welcome both sides back to the table to try to sort this matter out.

The Labour party supports a delivery office network that remains the heart of a community-based Royal Mail, with local posties based in our communities, mail delivered on time and parcels available for collection quickly and easily. Local delivery office closures often leave the most vulnerable and most affected with longer trips to collect mail and, in many cases, later deliveries of crucial post.

The Royal Mail insists that there is no programme of closures, but only ad hoc decisions to close offices where there are operational issues, but that flies in the face of the evidence. Since it was privatised in 2013, 75 delivery offices and up to 90 scale payment delivery offices, where postal workers are based, have been closed. Yet with £850 million more due to be taken out of the Royal Mail in dividends, it is clear that profit, not service, is driving the agenda for the Royal Mail. We have had one closure in my city of Sheffield, but that is dwarfed by large numbers in Manchester, London and many other places. It is difficult to believe that those closures represent anything but a planned programme to cut costs and drive profits in the privatised Royal Mail.

The Royal Mail also insists that there will be no compulsory redundancies. That is welcome, but the closure programme has already forced hundreds of staff to move workplace at a time when changes to the pension scheme are making working relations difficult for thousands of postal workers. I accept that as the type of post changes to more parcels purchased online, so must Royal Mail’s process. We might therefore expect to see a clear plan to adapt, relocate and improve delivery offices where there is need to provide more parking or parcel storage, but the current programme of closures has no timeline and no agreement, and there has been no overall public communication.

I welcome Royal Mail’s efforts to leave parcels safely with trusted neighbours and to offer quick and easy redelivery or pick-ups from local post boxes or facilities, and I am sure that can go further. However, although those options suit some people, for many—especially those in difficult-to-access properties or unpredictable working patterns—they are not appropriate. Everyone, including Royal Mail, knows that people still need collection points. Given the volume of mail we are talking about, that will normally need to be a delivery office. For example, in parts of Sheffield the closures are forcing some people to travel five miles through pretty terrible traffic to a city-centre delivery office with no parking. Of course, not everyone owns a car, so we can imagine the anxiety that causes many constituents—in particular disabled constituents who have to make that journey, possibly by public transport. We all know about the reliability of that.

Delivery office and scale payment delivery office closures often mean that residents and businesses will receive much needed post later in the day. We need our nation to be as productive as possible, but later post will prevent work from being done. The programme is bad for our economy.

When the Government, together with their bedfellows, the Lib Dems, sold off the Royal Mail at an excruciating low price, there was a clear statutory promise under the Postal Services (Universal Postal Service) Order 2012 that a universal service would continue. I believe delivery office closures are the start of a slippery slope towards a reduced service, falling far short of that promise.
The universal postal service order is a statutory instrument that sets out Royal Mail's responsibilities as a universal postal services provider. Article 4(d) guarantees that Royal Mail provides delivery offices as an option for the collection of undelivered mail. The closure of so many delivery offices is the start of a threat to the cherished and vital universal service. The order as it stands does not specify a distance from people’s homes or any specification for a collection service. What action does the Minister propose to take to protect delivery offices under the universal postal service? Does she agree that the order is far too vague on how Royal Mail must provide collection services?

The truth is this: there is little currently to stop the universal service from becoming universal in name only. The Government must give Ofcom, as the regulator, a stronger mandate under the universal postal service order to defend the wider network of postal deliveries. Otherwise, we face the prospect of Royal Mail becoming just another mail delivery company, delivering a service that gives residents and businesses their post later, and of longer journeys to collect undelivered mail.

The Labour party believes in a publicly owned Royal Mail: a people’s post, integrated with a strengthened post office bank. Such a move would provide a much better basis for an efficient service, potentially combining the collection of parcels with much-valued services to local people. The Government have still, after nearly a year, yet to respond to the submissions to their consultation on the future of the post office network. Will the Minister tell us when they will respond?

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, who moved the motion, and the many other Members who have spoken so passionately have my support in their fight for their local delivery offices, which provide the basis of a high-quality local service. With a Labour Government, we will, once again, have a post office bank. Such a move would provide a much better basis for an efficient service, potentially combining the collection of parcels with much-valued services to local people. However, the consultation criteria are so vague that lack of an obligation on Royal Mail itself to consult the public is a huge omission in that process. Royal Mail relies on notifying the local MP and assuming that the news will somehow get out. Of course we make a noise about it, but that is no substitute for the organisation itself consulting and engaging with the public it serves. Will the Minister comment on that?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I will take that point back to Royal Mail. I have been given the impression that the consultation requirements for changes such as the relocations and closures that we are discussing are the same for Royal Mail as they are for the Post Office. If that has not been the case in her constituency, I will raise that issue directly with Royal Mail.

Many local residents and businesses rely on the convenience facility that Royal Mail offers for the collection of parcels and items of mail. Where closure or relocation is necessary, Royal Mail takes care to ensure that there will be no impact on deliveries to its customers. I recognise from comments that have been made in the debate that there is a strong feeling that that statement does not seem to transmit to Members present or, possibly, to the wider public.

The Government must give Ofcom, as the regulator, a stronger mandate under the universal postal service order to defend the wider network of postal deliveries. Otherwise, we face the prospect of Royal Mail becoming just another mail delivery company, delivering a service that gives residents and businesses their post later, and of longer journeys to collect undelivered mail.

The Labour party believes in a publicly owned Royal Mail: a people’s post, integrated with a strengthened post office bank. Such a move would provide a much better basis for an efficient service, potentially combining the collection of parcels with much-valued services to local people. The Government have still, after nearly a year, yet to respond to the submissions to their consultation on the future of the post office network. Will the Minister tell us when they will respond?

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, who moved the motion, and the many other Members who have spoken so passionately have my support in their fight for their local delivery offices, which provide the basis of a high-quality local service. With a Labour Government, we will, once again, have a post office bank. Such a move would provide a much better basis for an efficient service, potentially combining the collection of parcels with much-valued services to local people. However, the consultation criteria are so vague that lack of an obligation on Royal Mail itself to consult the public is a huge omission in that process. Royal Mail relies on notifying the local MP and assuming that the news will somehow get out. Of course we make a noise about it, but that is no substitute for the organisation itself consulting and engaging with the public it serves. Will the Minister comment on that?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I will take that point back to Royal Mail. I have been given the impression that the consultation requirements for changes such as the relocations and closures that we are discussing are the same for Royal Mail as they are for the Post Office. If that has not been the case in her constituency, I will raise that issue directly with Royal Mail.

Many local residents and businesses rely on the convenience facility that Royal Mail offers for the collection of parcels and items of mail. Where closure or relocation is necessary, Royal Mail takes care to ensure that there will be no impact on deliveries to its customers. I recognise from comments that have been made in the debate that there is a strong feeling that that statement does not seem to transmit to Members present or, possibly, to the wider public.

The postmen and women who deliver to the postcode areas covered by a relocated delivery office will continue to serve the local community. Customers do not have to visit a delivery office to collect items of mail if they are unable to do so or are not at home when Royal Mail first attempts delivery. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) raised concerns about the alternative methods that are in place, which I will run through before I come to her proposal. Royal Mail has put in place a variety of options to ensure that customers get their deliveries in the most convenient way possible. It will always attempt to leave an item with a neighbour in the first instance, and customers may nominate a neighbour to take in their parcel. It is also possible for customers to arrange a delivery free of charge on a day that is convenient for them, including Saturdays. A further option is to arrange for the item to be delivered to a different address in the same postcode area. Those are several ways in which Royal Mail has attempted to maintain customer service.

The hon. Lady proposed that local networks of delivery points, including post offices, should be considered. There is already an option to redirect mail to a post office—that is a paid-for service, for which I believe the charge is 70p—but I am sure that Royal Mail will be open to that suggestion and others, as it is determined to improve its customer service throughout this change process.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister mentioned post offices. The whole point of the debate is that post offices are shutting down on the high street and that people are travelling further to collect parcels.
Margot James: The hon. Gentleman is not quite right about that. Post offices are not closing. In fact, the post office network is now sustainable; more outlets are opening for many more hours.

Hugh Gaffney: indicated dissent.

Margot James: If the hon. Gentleman means Crown post offices, I understand his point. Many of those post offices are being franchised to other retail outlets, but some of those outlets are more convenient for customers. That point should not be lost on him.

While I am addressing the Post Office, which is not the subject of this debate, I will take up the point made by the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally). I am not aware of the closure at the moment of any Royal Mail distribution centre in Falkirk, so perhaps he will provide the details. As far as I am aware, there is not one closing in Falkirk. He talked about the closure of post offices up and down the country. That simply is not the case. I will send him the statistics for post offices opening, rather than closing, around the country. The total numbers bear out what I am saying.

Jo Swinson: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will one last time, as I am aware of the clock ticking.

Jo Swinson: I appreciate the Minister’s giving way, and she is of course right that, as the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) mentioned, there were a significant number of post office closures under the Labour Government. That was halted, but that is exactly why it is a good network. I urge the Minister to ask Royal Mail not to put barriers in the way of people using the network, such as the 70p additional charge for consumers. Surely there must be a solution, given that Royal Mail is trying to save some costs. It is a small amount of money that might go to the post office, and if we save consumers from having to shell out, it would be more of a success.

Margot James: As the hon. Lady knows, I am not responsible for the operational aspects of Royal Mail, but I shall put that to its management. It is appropriate that she has raised the matter, but I must put that on record as my view.

Efficiency is a key component of ensuring the financial sustainability of the universal obligation. Price increases are not a long-term solution, particularly in such a competitive market. We have already heard that the market for letters has declined by 40%. The market for parcels, while buoyant, is highly competitive. At the time of the 2008 Hooper review, Royal Mail was estimated to be 40% less efficient than international comparators. Since the Postal Services Act 2011 Royal Mail has spent more than £1 billion on its transformation programme. In 2010 only 8% of Royal Mail letters were sorted by machine, compared with 85% for leading EU operators. The investment that Royal Mail has made has closed the gap and increased automation of letter sorting to more than 80%. Ofcom has found that those investments have improved efficiency.

Margot James: I was coming to efficiency. Ofcom has found that the investments made by Royal Mail have improved efficiency. Labour productivity in delivery and processing increased by 5.6% between 2011 and 2015. Royal Mail’s transformation programme between 2012 and 2015 produced cumulative savings of £340 million—an average of £110 million per year. In its review of postal services regulation, Ofcom recognised the steps that Royal Mail had taken on transformation but also concluded that it could do even more to improve efficiency. Royal Mail’s approach to the continuous improvement of its efficiency and productivity allows it to be more competitive and helps it to meet changing customer expectations.

The closure of some distribution points was because of the new market in packages, for example. Some of the old distribution points were simply not large enough or fit for purpose for the modern requirements for so many packages. The totality adds up to a company better positioned to grow its existing customer relationships and win new business.

A number of colleagues have talked about the privatisation and the financial side of the management of Royal Mail. I just point out that since privatisation Royal Mail has invested £1.4 billion in employee pension schemes. That is a vast amount of money. It has also paid out dividends of £800 million, which it has to do as a publicly quoted company. One of the key reasons for privatisation was to put Royal Mail on a footing where it could borrow on the markets to fund its investment rather than have to compete with schools, hospitals and other Treasury-backed spending obligations. As such, it has managed to raise £500 million in debt and has maintained profitability, as well as growing sales, in a highly competitive market. I do feel that rather than criticising the chief executive, I should put on record my admiration for her in the difficult job that she has had steering Royal Mail through a highly competitive environment. I appreciate that there are other views on the matter, but I must put that on record as my view.

Overall, the service and value provided by Royal Mail to its customers is good and, where it needs to make difficult commercial decisions, it does so in a way that minimises disruption to businesses and consumers. The CWU’s announcement last week of a 48-hour national strike, planned to commence on 19 October, will challenge even Royal Mail’s high delivery standards. We are hopeful that both parties will reach an amicable solution on the matters under discussion and avoid a strike, if at all possible, and the inevitable disruption to the postal service that would follow. If the worst happens, Royal Mail has planned contingency arrangements in place to minimise the impact on delivery services. It is inevitable, however, that some or all delivery offices will be affected during any industrial action.

Ofcom also has a well-established monitoring regime that allows it to track market developments closely and that informs its decisions about the regulatory framework. We hope that both sides will keep talking—I think that is something all hon. Members agree with—and that an amicable solution is found. It is in everyone’s interests to see Royal Mail continue its proud tradition of delivering the UK’s universal postal service in the private sector.

I congratulate the Royal Mail and its hard-working staff. I am sure it will continue to focus on delivering this key mission: connecting companies, customers and communities; making e-commerce happen; and delivering the universal service obligation.
5.5 pm

**Helen Hayes**: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed and taken the time to be here. I particularly thank everybody for their forbearance with the interruptions of the Division bell—including yourself, Mr Gapes. We are nearly at the end of the debate.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who spoke with such passion and conviction on the basis of his long experience working for Royal Mail. I join others in saying that I hope his career break from the Royal Mail will be significantly longer than five years, much as I am sure he is missed by his colleagues.

We have heard from many hon. Members, but notwithstanding the alternative provisions for parcel collection and redelivery that Royal Mail has put in place, those solutions simply do not work for many communities across the country. They certainly ring hollow with my constituents, as it is not the case that nobody ever needs to visit a delivery office. In my opening speech, I mentioned the situation for users of the PO box services, and the same applies to people who have to pay excess charges for their mail. There are reasons why it is sometimes essential to visit a Royal Mail delivery office.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) mentioned the possibility of using the network of post offices more for collection services. It is problematic that customers currently have to pay for that service. From my experience in negotiations with Royal Mail on the situation in my constituency, I know that often post offices do not have the physical capacity to cope with large numbers of parcels, so I think that is a flawed solution.

I come back to the issue that I started with. The problem in many communities is the erosion of the services that Royal Mail provides. What is being proposed in my constituency, if you understand its geography and how public transport works there, simply lacks all credibility as an approach to public service. I see an organisation that is putting profit at its heart and not its obligations to the public that it was set up to serve. Once again, I ask the Minister to consider intervening and using her good offices to secure the services that our communities rely on, and to think again about Royal Mail’s status in the private sector as a profit-making entity.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered Royal Mail delivery office closures.

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11 OCTOBER 2017

**Advice Services (Nottingham)**

[**NADINE DORRIES in the Chair**]

5.9 pm

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to advice services in Nottingham.

To be a new Member is to be confronted by a series of firsts on an almost daily basis, and today is no different. This is the first Westminster Hall debate that I have had the privilege of leading and my first contribution to a debate with you in the Chair, Ms Dorries. I hope it do it well. I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about advice services in Nottingham, which is something that I feel very strongly about and my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) and for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) do too. I know they were keen to join this discussion, but the Divisions have changed the timing, so I do not think that is likely. I shall crack on nevertheless.

Advice services are often unseen and unheralded in this place and in society in general. Today I want to do something about that to raise the profile of the fine services in our city. I want to publicise their excellent and vital work and look ahead to challenges down the road, which we as national lawmakers must support them in tackling. In our city a wide range of organisations offer advice to those who need it. Some operate on a city-wide basis, such as the law centre and the citizens advice bureau; some operate on a community basis, such as the Bestwood Advice Centre; and some work with specific communities, such as Disability Direct. I suspect to a certain extent I may be making a rod for my own back, because, as I started to pull together information for this debate, the wide range of terrific advice that is provided in the city and in my constituency became clear. There is a danger I might miss someone, so I hope not to cause too much offence, and I hope they will understand that the comments I make also apply to them if I miss them by name.

In a constituency such as mine where far too many residents are sadly caught up in cyclical poverty, we need lots going on. Advice on benefits, debt, housing, employment, health, immigration and much more can be a vital support system in helping people get through hard times and back on their feet. I will use the time available to detail some of the advice services already available in Nottingham and in my constituency, and to express my appreciation for the difference that they make.

I will start with the Nottingham Law Centre, which, as we can tell from the name, offers legal advice free of charge to the people of Nottingham. It was one of the first groups that I met as the Member of Parliament for Nottingham North and it was part of the inspiration for this debate. It provides advice on debt, housing, welfare benefits and employment law, as well as advice and representation to anyone attending court for possession proceedings through the duty scheme. Having spoken to Sally, one of the senior solicitors, it is clear that the latter service is what she is most proud of and what makes the biggest direct impact on people’s lives. The centre’s solicitors usually spend four days a week in court representing around 1,000 clients a year, many of
whom are desperately reacting to financial emergencies that send them into rent or mortgage arrears and who have a very real prospect of losing their home.

Such problems can often be caused by changes outside of people’s control. The bedroom tax, benefits caps and zero-hours contracts all leave ordinary people struggling to get by, already unable to meet pre-existing financial commitments. Nottingham Law Centre is very proud of its success rate in this area. I am sure that everyone they have helped is incredibly grateful.

When I spoke to Sally, it was clear that the centre felt it could do much more. Funding shortages due to legal aid cuts increase workloads, and Government tendering changes mean that the scope of the advice that can be offered has reduced. For example, the centre is no longer able to provide an immigration advice service, or any advice to people who might come from outside of the city, which leads to a real risk of postcode lotteries. Over time we have seen the ability of vital organisations such as the law centre to help people in need radically diminish. That is bad for individuals and also bad for the community in general for reasons that I shall turn to shortly.

Local government has a critical role to play in the provision of advice services.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on this crucial topic. Before he moves on to local government, I want to mention immigration advice services. As the MP for Nottingham East, I have constituents coming to me all the time because of the poor level of immigration advice available, as my hon. Friend has said. The law centre does not do as much as it did, so there is an expectation that MPs can somehow give quasi-legal advice on these issues, when there is a need for real expert help of a legal character, and we are desperately short of that, certainly in Nottingham.

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I know he feels strongly about this issue and I share his concern. In a diverse city such as ours, with the new and emerging communities that we have, there is a gap and it is not clear what is meant to fill it.

As I said, local government has a critical role to play in the provision of advice services. Nottingham City Council has played an admirable role, again in incredibly difficult circumstances, when it comes to budgets. With significant cuts and the extraordinary pressures that an ageing and growing population can put on council budgets, it might have been tempted to deprioritise this area. After all, it is not a universal service and—dare I say—not a vote winner. However, the council has not done that.

I played a small role in this area in my previous life as a councillor: my commissioning committee commissioned the new advice set-up. I say that more as a declaration of interest than an attempt to take any credit, because I really cannot do so.

The city council has consolidated its contracting, brought organisations together in a consortium and commissioned six of them across the city—the law centre I mentioned is one, as are Bestwood Advice Centre and St Anns Advice Centre, which both work in my constituency—to provide support in the city. Other communities might benefit from that model, and Ministers might benefit from looking at it also.

Having high-quality support is of course very good for individuals in their time of need, but actually it is good for all of us in the community, because the financial impact is considerable. Over the first half of this financial year alone, the advice services have supported city residents to access more than £3.6 million in benefits to which they are entitled and to tackle more than £0.5 million in debt. They have dealt with nearly 3,000 inquiries, and more than 1,000 cases have been taken up directly. Of course, behind every pound and penny is a human being starting on the road to get out from under their burden. Their mental health is improved and hopefully their life is changed; and as I said, for us as local taxpayers, the work is extraordinarily good value.

Disability Direct Nottingham is a group I know well; it is based in Basford in my constituency. It is a little different from the other services that I have spoken about, in that it works with a community of identity. It was born out of a goal to make a difference for a specific group of people—people in Nottingham with disabilities. It is the only information and advice service that caters specifically for all manner of people with a disability in Nottingham, and it prides itself, rightly, on the considerable impact that it makes for disabled people, older people and carers residing in the city and beyond.

In preparation for the debate, we were in touch with Charlotte Throssel, who I have worked with for some time. She is the services manager and makes the bulk of the decisions in response to what is needed. We asked her to summarise what the staff and volunteers spend most of their time doing for the users. I do not have enough time now to talk about those things, because they are incredible; if it can be imagined, they are doing it. Suffice it to say that that organisation exists to help and will do so in any way it can, whether that means supporting its clients with legal proceedings, giving advice on welfare, assisting with forms or even helping in the garden, as I believe happens sometimes, too. The organisation gets more than 3,000 inquiries each year and has helped to secure almost £0.5 million in backdated benefits. Its success rate at appeals and tribunals—I find this staggering: perhaps I should not have been surprised, but I was—is 84%, so five out of every six times, it succeeds. I think that that says something about the system that it has come up with.

That is being done with funding from the Big Lottery Fund or through fundraising or donations; the council helps with premises. Disability Direct works really hard and does an outstanding job with six staff members—only two full time—and almost 70 volunteers. I can also say, from personal experience, that Charlotte puts on a mean barbecue.

That is a taste of the breadth of what is going on, whether services are working citywide, in local communities or with specific groups of people. There are other organisations, which we encountered and worked with in preparing for the debate: My Sight Notts, the Wellbeing Hub and Nottinghamshire Deaf Society. As I said, I am making a rod for my own back today, because doubtless I will have missed someone and I would not want them to think that they were not appreciated, because they really are. Nevertheless, in having these conversations about what is going on, I think that three clear challenges emerged and are worthy of our consideration.
First—this point is probably not revelatory—advice services cannot always meet the demand for their services. Of course that is because there is lots to do in a community such as mine, but one significant limiting factor, which I hope Ministers can consider, is the quality of information that comes out of public services, which can lead to people getting into a mess or confusion. Sometimes there is unclear information, distorted by inaccurate reporting in the media, and it leads to confusion and a great call on advice services.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I pay tribute to the citizens advice bureaux, which do fantastic work across my constituency. Their work is set to become even more vital as universal credit is rolled out, particularly given that the Government’s helpline charges 55p a minute. Does my hon. Friend agree that as their role becomes even more important, they must be on a secure financial footing?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention; I agree completely. At the moment—I will turn to this shortly—there is a blizzard of funding that has to be pulled together, and each of those sources is under pressure, for various reasons. At a time when, as my hon. Friend says and as was said in this place earlier today, the Government are charging 55p a minute for people to get advice from those who run the service, clearly they are likely, especially when in financial distress, to reach out to others who do not do that. There is a struggle meeting the demand, because of a lack of information. Clearer advice, more consistency and easier access to information would reduce confusion, and reduce the front-door work they have to do to manage expectations and guide people where to go. That would free up more time, money and effort to work on the core cases.

Secondly, funding is a persistent challenge. Our advice sector in Nottingham is pinned together with council resources, EU money, lottery funds and donations of time and money. All of those deliver excellent value. There is a £10 return for each £1 spent regarding benefits that individuals are entitled to, and £3.50 for each £1 spent working on debt relief, but all of those are under pressure for various reasons. As we head into the Budget, Ministers should be mindful of the cumulative impact and ripple effect of their cuts, especially unseen cuts, such as those to local government, which then go through different commissioning committees and end up with changes that perhaps were not meant in that way.

Finally, I want to use my remaining time to talk about universal credit, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield raised. Our analysis indicates that by the end of this Parliament, if it runs a full term, there will be some 23,000 families receiving universal credit in Nottingham North. We know that experience from pilot communities such as Newcastle has shown that universal credit roll-out has led to considerable hardship, with 85% of council tenants on universal credit being in arrears. That has the unintended consequence of putting strain on the housing revenue account. That challenges local government budgets and actually reduces their ability to build new homes. It is a decreasing spiral. I hope Ministers will heed calls from Opposition parties, national charities and even their own Members, to delay this, while they at least work out the very real challenges in the system.

I just want to tell a story that I picked up from Citizens Advice about a woman called Claire. She was in great distress when she first met an adviser and it was very difficult for her to talk about her situation. She had left her home because her ex-partner had become violent and physically assaulted her. On top of that physical and emotional trauma, Claire now had to find a new home, apply for benefits and get herself on a new footing for her new life. She found a new home and applied for universal credit, but she waited over eight weeks for her first payment. She had been working a little bit in a local shop and was paid weekly, but she did not have any savings. She was unable to make rent payments properly for two months, leaving her in arrears, and she was also in arrears with her council tax. She had some credit card debt, which she was unable to service during this time. At the end of this two months of waiting, she was severely in debt and being threatened with eviction proceedings, as well as the emotional trauma she already had. During that two-month waiting period, she got by on food bank vouchers and tokens for electricity and gas, just to keep going. However, she now faced mounting debt, with no real way to tackle it. When her universal credit payment came through, she had hoped to get back on her feet and start to set herself up again—in line with what the Prime Minister said the system ought to be doing—and to make some formal arrangements to pay back her debt. However, the paperwork—no discussion with her—stated that 40% of her entitlement would be deducted to cover rent and council tax arrears. That meant that Claire had £30 a week to cover food, gas, electricity and other household essentials, leaving her in a perpetual cycle of borrowing to cover her essential needs, and the system has proven very inflexible as she tries to get herself back on to her feet. There are too many Claires and if we continue on this course at this pace, there will be many more.

I do not want to conclude my contribution on a negative note. I hope I have shown to colleagues the incredible range of advice services in our community, wonderful things done under the most difficult circumstances for those who really need it. I came to this place because I want to give my life to the service of others, and when I see that in my community too it really inspires and motivates me to work even harder. Those people represent the best of my city and most days their work goes unheralded and unseen, but not this day.

5.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on securing this debate, his first in Westminster Hall, and first of many, I have no doubt. I congratulate him on his interesting and compelling speech. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to set out how the Government support the Citizens Advice service and the importance of having access to free, confidential and impartial advice. I have seen for myself in my own constituency the difference that such support can make to people and families, often the most vulnerable, often, as the hon. Gentleman ably pointed out, in crisis and under immense pressure.
The hon. Gentleman mentioned Citizens Advice Nottingham and District, Nottingham Law Centre and Nottingham City Council’s welfare rights service as examples of success, and I share his appreciation of the work of those agencies and similar advice services across the country.

The services are indeed well used. In 2015-16, more than 8,000 people received advice and support from Citizens Advice Nottingham and District, most of whom said they could not have resolved their issue without receiving that help. It is important to appreciate that these advice services not only help people to resolve financial difficulties but have a profound impact upon people’s lives, sometimes improving their health and reducing stress as a result of the help they offer.

Also in 2015-16, more than 2,900 clients were provided with free legal advice by Nottingham Law Centre on issues ranging from debt to welfare, and from benefits to housing. The centre succeeded in getting nearly £67,000 worth of debt written off for its clients, and I know that in one of the other instances that the hon. Gentleman cited—I think it was the Disability Nottingham case—the centre had a tremendous success rate in supporting vulnerable people through tribunals.

The welfare rights service delivered by Nottingham City Council also helps to provide free, confidential and impartial advocacy and advice to citizens from across the city, including making home visits to those people who are unable to attend an appointment.

I must say one thing in respect of the legal aid position that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, in particular the very sad case that he mentioned involving Claire. The Government are committed to ensuring that legal aid continues to be available, particularly in the most important cases, such as those involving domestic violence or when children are at risk of being taken into care.

Given the sensitive issues that those services cover, it is important that they are provided independently of Government, so that their clients can trust that their problems will be treated impartially and in confidence. Also, as many of those clients’ cases relate to interactions with Government agencies or services, such as benefits, it is important to note that the local citizens advice bureaux operate independently and are funded from a variety of sources. In the main, however, they receive their core funding from the local authority in which they are located.

Mr Leslie: On that point, the Minister is right to talk about the need for agencies to be at arm’s length from the Government and from Ministers, but I do not think that that necessarily negates the idea of their having some kind of statutory force, to give them that sense of being a function that is supported by society as a whole. If we cannot have that, we must recognise that this is a real “invest to save” situation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) pointed out, for every £1 invested in advice services the Government can save a considerable amount later down the line. It is because these services exist in a sort of non-specific, non-legal context that we sometimes rely too much on charity to underpin advice, rather than making it a right that people have.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I would not want to negate the role of charities and local self-help groups, which play a huge role in their communities, but there is a role for Government to ensure that some impartial, independent advice is available. Through the Citizens Advice national agreements that we have, my Department funds Citizens Advice nationally. For example, helping people in the area of fuel poverty and energy advice is a statutory service that Citizens Advice offers; the service is funded by Government, but the advice is given impartially and independently of Government. Therefore, it is important to note that Citizens Advice operates independently, even though it is funded by our Department to a certain extent, to help it to meet its resourcing needs.

It is the local authority, not central Government, that is better placed to make decisions about advice provision in its local area, based on local priorities and need. However, we must remember that local authorities are independent of central Government. They are responsible for their own finances and recruitment, and are accountable to their local electorate. So, when it comes to spending or resourcing, however difficult the decisions are, it is for local authorities such as Nottingham City Council to make those decisions. I hope that, whatever the outcome, the people of Nottingham will still be able to access free, independent advice, and that the national body, Citizens Advice, which is funded by my Department, will help to ensure that that continues to be the case.

We know and understand that some people are vulnerable, and that some will need more support than others. That is why the Government continue to spend around £90 billion a year on a strong welfare safety net. One example of that is our troubled families programme, which is helping to turn around the lives of 400,000 people. I know that it is doing very important work in Nottingham, and under the priority families programme led by Nottingham City Council, 1,200 families have already been helped to turn their lives around, and a further 3,480 families are engaging in the programme.

To reiterate, the Government remain committed to, and supportive of, the right to free, independent advice. As I have said, that advice is best delivered by independent organisations at the local level, although I am mindful of the need for the Government to continue to play a role on a statutory basis, as I mentioned earlier in response to the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie). However, those with the knowledge, expertise and experience are helping people from all walks of life on all manner of issues.

Clearly, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North pointed out, a huge amount of good work is being done by the people of Nottingham, the staff and the volunteers in providing this vital work and support. I salute them all. I hope that the local Government will continue to recognise and support their hugely valuable work for many years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

5.32 pm

Sitting suspended.
The Arts: Health Effects

5.35 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the arts on health.

It is a great pleasure to appear under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries—obviously with some trepidation, as I know that you are a hard taskmaster. I hope that we can exchange messages on WhatsApp afterwards, about how well I have done in this afternoon’s debate.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Only if you are going to read them.

Mr Vaizey: Health and wellbeing is much on our minds at the moment, and I am co-chair of the all-party group on arts, health and wellbeing, so this is a great opportunity to debate the significant role that arts-based interventions can play in addressing a wide variety of health and social care issues.

In July the all-party group published an inquiry into that important issue—I am holding it up to get the appropriate screen grab, which can go viral on social media. I can see that the Minister is holding it up as well. If someone could pass it to the Opposition spokesman to hold up, we could get a full house. The report was the result of two years of research and discussions with individuals and organisations from the worlds of health, arts, academia and politics. I assure the House, because I had nothing to do with it, that it is of the highest quality. The people who can take credit are Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, who effectively wrote it, Alexandra Coulter, who runs the all-party group with such effectiveness, and my colleague Lord Alan Howarth, the chairman, who invited me to become the co-chairman.

The inquiry and report provide considerable evidence to support the idea that arts-based approaches can help people to stay well, recover faster, manage long-term conditions and experience better quality of life. It is important to stress that arts engagement and participation can have a positive impact at every stage of a person’s life. I was struck, for example, when reading the report—I should have known this fact—that one in five mothers suffers from a mental health condition at the time of, or in the first year after, childbirth. The report shows some of the interventions that can help. In Stockport an arts on prescription pilot offered visual art and music projects to women who had or were at risk of postnatal depression. Every woman who participated experienced improvements in wellbeing, communication, quality of life and many other variants.

In my constituency suffered from depression and anxiety, and she tells me she is not yet recovered from her illness through music-based active sessions, almost every single participant who had suffered from a stroke saw a reduction in their symptoms and experienced great social benefits. A range of other studies have shown similarly positive effects. Group singing and dance has been shown to improve the voice and movement of people with Parkinson’s disease, and singing enhances lung function and the quality of life for people with chronic respiratory disorders. Arts-based interventions such as listening to music have also been shown to reduce the physiological effects of cancer and coronary heart disease.

Let me run through a few brief examples, because I know that many Members want to speak. An arts on prescription programme run by Arts and Health in Cambridgeshire found that three-quarters of participants saw a decrease in anxiety. There is clear and growing evidence that with illness and long-term conditions, arts engagement can alter the morphology of the brain and help speed recovery from neural damage. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Humber NHS Foundation Trust have run Strokestra, a pilot collaboration where, through music-based active sessions, almost every single participant who had suffered from a stroke saw a reduction in their symptoms and experienced great social benefits such as enhanced communication. A range of other studies have shown similarly positive effects. Group singing and dance has been shown to improve the voice and movement of people with Parkinson’s disease, and singing enhances lung function and the quality of life for people with chronic respiratory disorders. Arts-based interventions such as listening to music have also been shown to reduce the physiological effects of cancer and coronary heart disease.

Mr Vaizey: Health and wellbeing is much on our minds at the moment, and I am co-chair of the all-party group on arts, health and wellbeing, so this is a great opportunity to debate the significant role that arts-based interventions can play in addressing a wide variety of health and social care issues.

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Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Maybe I take this opportunity to plug the Liverpool Philharmonic, which has done similarly good work for the past eight years? Lead musicians and musicians work one-on-one and in groups across my constituency and the wider Liverpool city region. Unfortunately I have not had time to read the report, but if that has not been looked into, it is a great study of positive work that is being done across my constituency.

Mr Vaizey: The Liverpool Phil is an absolutely amazing organisation. I know that you, Ms Dorries, will know it from your own childhood. May I also particularly commend its work on the In Harmony programme, which is one of the most remarkable education initiatives that we have seen? It was started under the last Labour Government but carried on. I am pleased to say, by the current Government.
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I very much agree with his examples of where arts can be used to help people with recovery or to manage long-term conditions. I am sure that he would be interested in the Nordoff Robbins music therapy programmes that are run in my constituency. Does he accept that there is a wider role for the arts in public health, and does he think that there is an opportunity to align public health targets and ambitions with music and other arts interventions?

Mr Vaizey: I completely agree with the hon. Lady, and I was going to mention Nordoff Robbins. It is the largest music therapy charity in the country. It reaches 7,000 people every year and aims to double that participation by the end of the decade. She is exactly on point: Public Health England is meant to be involved in focusing on prevention. To a certain extent we have to shift the whole health debate from cure. Cures can be important, but we do not do enough about prevention, and the arts can play an absolutely crucial role. I back the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I very much agree with his examples of where arts can be used to help people with recovery or to manage long-term conditions. I am sure that he would be interested in the Nordoff Robbins music therapy programmes that are run in my constituency. Does he accept that there is an opportunity to align public health targets and ambitions with music and other arts interventions?

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That approach is particularly in keeping with NHS England’s “Five Year Forward View”, published in 2014, which emphasises a need for a radical upgrade in preventive health interventions. Arts-based approaches can provide a cost-effective response to this objective. Mental health carries an approximate annual economic and social cost of more than £100 billion—about the same as the total NHS budget. The arts can play a significant role. A mental health recovery centre in Wales, co-designed by users and utilising the arts, has saved the NHS £300,000 a year, while an arts on prescription project has led GP consultations to drop by a third, saving £200 per patient.

A social return of between £4 and £11 has been calculated for every £1 invested in arts on prescription.

Arts-based approaches can also help health and social care staff in their own work. Within the NHS, more than £2.5 billion is lost through sick days every year. Arts engagement helps the staff to improve their own wellbeing, too, but it is not a habitual part of the training and professional development of health and social care professionals. With so much evidence supporting the effectiveness of the arts to improve health and wellbeing, it is clear that more should be done. With the correct support, this approach can really flourish.

What the all-party group is really calling for is a culture change, not legislation or regulation. Arts-based interventions offer an alternative resource to systems that are under increasing pressure and need fresh thinking. One of the report’s key recommendations is for leaders from the worlds of arts and health to come together to establish a strategic centre to support the advance of good practice, promote collaboration, co-ordinate research, and inform policy and delivery.

The Government can, of course, play a vital role. They can help the conversation between the relevant bodies and organisations and help this objective to be realised. We need greater engagement with policy makers, and Ministers must therefore be part of the process. I really hope that the Minister will engage with colleagues not just in his own Department but in the Department of Health, the Department for Education and the Department for Education and the Department of Work and Pensions, to develop a cross-departmental strategy to support the delivery of arts-based interventions within our health and social care systems.

I am delighted to see the Minister in his place; I think this is our first debate together. I have to say—although I am parti pris—that I hear only incredible reports of his work, so I do not want him to take this the wrong way, but part of me wishes a Health Minister were responding to the debate instead of him. It is a matter of some sadness to me that the last Health Minister to make a speech about the role of the arts in health was Alan Johnson. The current Health Secretary is a former Culture Secretary, who knows the sector well and should understand the opportunities that it presents to make a real impact on health and wellbeing.

I know the Minister will give a brilliant response. As he is aware, the White Paper formally recognises the all-party group’s report and states that the Government will make a formal response. However, I hope that in the coming weeks and months we will also hear from Health Ministers on this very important subject, and from other Ministers whose Departments’ policies have a great impact on wellbeing.
I will talk briefly about my island’s relationship with art and art’s wider purpose—there are some fantastic examples of the use of art in healthcare on the island—and then about Arts Council England’s visit to the Isle of Wight on 20 October, which we are looking forward to, both to reinforce our reputation as Britain’s “arts island” and to seek a stronger relationship with national institutions.

I look forward to Government support in enabling that, and I thank the Minister for attending the debate.

On the island we have a unique relationship with art. Our history is in some senses an example of art’s meditative and restorative roles. From 1790 onward, when chaos and revolution in Europe made travel difficult, artists and writers began to explore the United Kingdom more. They came to the island, in part, to find a sense of peace and to be inspired by our rural tranquillity, but also our inspiring nature and sea. The island provided inspiration for artists. Turner’s first great work was of the Solent, with the Needles as its backdrop. Tennyson moved to the island to be inspired by it, and some of his work has a meditative and calming sense of his view of life and death. Perhaps the most famous poem that he wrote was called “Crossing the Bar”. Physically, it described the journey from the Solent from the mainland to the island, but metaphysically, it talked about the journey from life to afterlife:

“Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea.”

I use that quote because art is used on the island in palliative care, in youth mental care and in the NHS. In Newport, our county town, our wonderful hospice uses art to help islanders who are dying to understand and accept difficult and profound issues. Our hospice director, Nigel Hartley, trained as a pianist and psychologist prior to working in the hospice movement. If the Minister ever has a chance to talk to him, he will find him an interesting person. He champions the use of art in healthcare, and we have a wonderful project with the Royal Academy whereby artists and people in the hospice work together to create works of art. We are lucky to have people such as Nigel on our island.

Elsewhere, in our Quay Arts project run by the multi-talented Paul Armfield, we have a WAVES programme that engages over 200 young people. Many of them were reported to us or came through the young carers or mental health services, and they are engaged in the use of art to enable them to express themselves in a more fulfilling way.

Our Healing Arts project operates within our NHS trust, both in commissioning art and organising interactive and creative expression.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. I call Dr Lisa Cameron.

6 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and also to hear the fantastic, thorough and detailed speech by the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who initiated the debate. It is long overdue that this issue was debated. It is extremely important for health, mental health and wellbeing, as has been indicated.

I declare an interest as a psychologist. I also have to declare that I am not particularly artistic and do not have much talent in this area, but I pay tribute to all of the therapists who work in art therapy. I also pay tribute to occupational therapists who work in our hospitals, aiding people in their recovery and rehabilitation, building their confidence and skills and ensuring that they are able to fulfil their potential. When people’s self-esteem is at its lowest and they feel most in need, art therapy can be extremely important in helping them to focus, helping their mental health and also in helping them to build self-confidence and purpose.

When I worked in the secure hospital at the State Hospital in Scotland, I saw first-hand the excellent artwork that inmates could do. They were held there, perhaps due to significant mental health issues, without the limit of time, and they perhaps felt that purpose had left their lives and that they had little direction. Being able to showcase their artwork in the hospital and beyond was a fantastic celebration of the skills that they retained, and the things that they could do very purposefully, post-secure hospital, in terms of reintegration into the community. We should never underestimate the value of art therapy.

Before I finish, I want to celebrate some of the work undertaken in my constituency of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. The Chill Out Club and the Agape Wellbeing group are both in East Kilbride, both have funding for art therapy and work with people who have mental health problems to help them with their recovery. I also celebrate the work undertaken at the Hope Hub, through the Hope Church in Blackwood. It is excellent work, bringing together people from different backgrounds—those involved in the church and beyond—to come in, form bonds and develop their skills and interests.

It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. Funding for art therapy is funding well spent. I want to hear from the Minister on future directions and support for this important area.

6.3 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on securing this important debate. I agree with the Arts Council, which says:

“Art and culture make life better, help to build diverse communities and improve our quality of life.”

As a Bristol MP, I am proud of the reputation my great city has in support for and delivery of the arts. I say to the Minister, whose Department is making the decision on the Channel 4 relocation, that Bristol is its natural home. Channel 4 would be welcomed with open arms, supported by a booming sector with expertise and a vision for the future of broadcasting.

As the Member for Bristol North West, I represent a constituency of have-nots when it comes to access to the arts. For many of my constituents, getting to and accessing the best of Bristol’s art and culture is economically unviable. That is why I welcome the excellent work of Bristol’s Colston Hall, and the Bristol Music Trust, which works from it, in reaching out to distant communities to bring affordable arts to the many, not just the few. I also congratulate them on their funding efforts to build the first fully accessible music venue in the country.
[Darren Jones]

In Bristol, we rely on performers from across the world and, indeed, Europe. I therefore call on the Minister and the Government to support the Musicians Union’s call for a commitment to ensuring the free movement of musicians.

I will conclude my remarks by talking about music and performance. As a child growing up in Lawrence Weston in my constituency—a council estate on the outskirts of Bristol—I never really got to experience the arts, but one Christmas, when I was in primary school, there was a performance from a local orchestra. There I was, sat on the floor, amazed by the noise that the musicians produced and the sound that they created, together, as an outfit. I decided that that was what I wanted to do, so I went to Portway Community School, now Oasis Academy Brightstowe, which had an amazing school orchestra, led at the time by Nicola Berry, and I learned the tenor saxophone—first, in the symphonic wind orchestra and, latterly, as a jazz musician.

Thanks to predecessors of the Bristol Music Trust, I got access to instruments, one-on-one tuition, music and the ability to practise and take my grades—because of public funding. Music taught me discipline and teamwork, and built my confidence, but public funds are required for pupils whose parents cannot afford to provide them with access to music. Children from low-income families are three times more likely to get a degree if they have been involved in arts and culture than those who have not.

I am always grateful to the people who gave me that opportunity and I call on the Government to ensure that other children, in my constituency and around the country, are not left behind. We must not let the music halls of our schools fall silent across the country. Our performance and confidence as young people, as cities and as a country is based on arts and culture. I hope that the Government will continue to invest in and support local authorities and charities to ensure that all of us, regardless of background, have access to excellent arts and culture training and performance, and the ability to build our confidence for roles such as becoming a Member of Parliament in the future.

6.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) for securing the debate, for the inquiry that he started in 2015 and for its findings, published in July 2017 along with recommendations and conclusions.

I want to speak about one specific issue in the short time I have and look not only at the positive impact that the arts have in hospitals, but the role that they play for veterans. The report made 10 recommendations, including the need for arts organisations to work with health organisations and vice versa. Given that that was one of the key recommendations, this is clearly an important issue for veterans. Help for Heroes supports those with illnesses and injuries sustained while serving in the British armed forces. Often those injuries are not visible, with veterans carrying mental scars and dealing with mental health issues on a daily basis.

Although it may seem unlikely, art is a useful weapon in the fight against physical and psychological injuries. In the last year, up to April 2017, Help for Heroes delivered around 150 arts and craft events across its four recovery centres and outreach locations, reaching out to approximately 1,800 very needy participants. At those recovery centres, wounded, injured and sick servicemen and servicewomen can take part in a variety of art classes including, importantly, one-to-one sessions. Activities in woodwork, art, photography, poetry, stone-carving, music and singing—all those things, together and individually, make a difference. Mental wellbeing is vital to a full recovery, but often it can be difficult to talk openly about past and ongoing struggles. The arts can help veterans express themselves while creating something personal.

I want to quote someone whose name it is important to have on the record. We are all moved by what we hear and many of us in this Chamber are aware of these issues. Martin Wade from Surrey was recently awarded the top prize in the wounded, injured and sick category for his painting, “Never Ending Story”, at the Army arts exhibition in Salisbury. Martin served in the Army for 15 years before medical discharge due to post-traumatic stress disorder. He said:

“I was first encouraged to paint after I was medically discharged. Ever since then, Art has been my companion. Being able to have that expressive outlet has been an integral part of my recovery. It is the key component in my toolbox I use to cope with the daily challenges of PTSD...Art takes me on a journey and whilst I am on that journey, all I am thinking about is art. It takes me away from thinking about my challenges. It allows me respite from the stress of dealing with my PTSD.”

For me, that is one of the key things that art can do.

I do not think that anyone here can be in any doubt about the amazing effect that art can have, not only on veterans and people who are dealing with mental health conditions or battling loneliness, but on everyone, in every walk of life. Engaging with some form of art is vital for our wellbeing. It is important that we recognise that and make time in our busy lives to pursue it.

6.9 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to participate in this debate and to speak about High Peak Community Arts—a fabulous project that has been based in my constituency for more than 20 years, and has helped people with their health and wellbeing throughout that time. It is a real pioneer of outcomes. At the moment, it is funded through five-year lottery funding grants, and it helps people with mental health and wellbeing issues in particular. It creates community arts projects around my constituency, including in ceramics and mosaics. There is a sundial in a park, and it has created a life-sized willow-frame donkey for an elderly people’s care home. Working together on those projects helps people in a way that our health services often cannot.

With Project eARTh, High Peak Community Arts creates arts projects to enhance the natural environment. Those are aimed at adults who are experiencing mental distress or other long-term conditions, such as anxiety, stress, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder. Generally, the participants are isolated and are lacking in self-confidence and self-esteem, and working together on those projects addresses such issues.

Being creative is relaxing, absorbing and takes people’s minds away from negative thoughts. People work together in the groups, discussing themes and ideas. They often physically work on the same project. We have
unveiling ceremonies, in which the projects are unveiled in communities, which gives people a real sense of worth and wellbeing in the knowledge that they have created something.

The story of one of the participants illustrates the project better than any sort of evaluation. The lady was left severely traumatised seven years ago as the result of an armed robbery at her store. She suffered post-traumatic stress disorder and did not leave the house for four years. She lost all her friends because she was unable to talk to them anymore. In spite of all the care she received from doctors, counsellors and other health professionals, she still could not go out on her own. She says, “I was petrified that my life was collapsing. I felt helpless.”

She felt that nothing could help her, until her support worker took her along to the art group. She managed to speak to people again, and took part in the project. Since then, she has been able to get out of the house to take her dog for a walk. She is not 100% recovered, but the projects have helped her more than anything else.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order.

6.12 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thank the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) for securing the debate, especially after yesterday’s timely World Mental Health Day.

In my previous job, I was an actor and a writer, and I used to think, “What do I contribute to the world?” My sister, who is a theatre nurse, used to say, “When I come home, I want to relax. I want to watch a soap opera, because it makes me feel better.” A recent report from University College London and Lancaster University supports her experience. The researchers discovered that watching live theatre can stimulate a person’s cardiovascular system as much as 30 minutes of exercise.

It is not just watching that has an impact; taking part has even more of an impact. Kirklees is part of the Creative Minds project, which works with NHS England to help service users improve their wellbeing. One of the projects, Active for Life, helps users with mental health issues to access free cycling, and it has had a brilliant impact. One user said, “You’re a life saver.” Another said, “I get really ill sometimes and I can tell you this really works.”

The Arts Council understands the powerful impact of the arts on communities and wellbeing. It has targeted areas with a low take-up of the arts—Kirklees is one—and has invested in Creative People and Places, which brings culture in all its forms to the community. It empowers citizens not just to watch but to take part. It is about not just large organisations, but community organisations, too: Batley Choir, Batley Poets, Batley Smile and local youth theatres such as Acorn and West Yorkshire Youth Academy all enhance the lives of people with mental ill health.

The bigger question is, what are we doing to ensure access to the arts to support our young people’s mental health? Secondary schools in London have arts on a carousel: art for one term, drama for another and music for a third. In fact, at an all-party group on arts in schools yesterday, I heard a teacher explain how she was first an art teacher, then was asked to take on photography, and then later in the year was asked to take on design technology. That cannot be right.

Overall, participation in arts subjects in schools has fallen by 8.4%, and the indication is that the downward trend will continue. There has been a 28% drop in the take-up of GCSEs in creative arts and a 43% drop in design. It is even worse locally in Batley and Spen. There is a clear and consistent north-south divide in entry to arts subjects at GCSE. If we want a country that is fit and ready for the future, healthy in mind and body, we need to widen access to the arts, rather than allow this Government to withdraw the privilege.

6.14 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) for securing this debate. Art underpins community and our society. We have heard many great contributions about its effect on individual constituencies, and first I want to draw attention to the Scottish diaspora tapestry that was displayed in Westminster Hall earlier this year. That art brought together 800 people from around the world to create a world-class tapestry showing the spread of Scotland’s diaspora. In that, something important lies: art is for everybody. It is a universal language, from cave paintings all the way through. If we weaken our link with art and leave art out, we greatly endanger our communities and the coherence of our society.

The value of art to health is best summed up by my constituent, Grace Warnock, a young girl who has had far too many encounters with the health service in her short life. In that time, she has used art to express her feelings. She will not forgive me for this, but she drew her own intestines to show the surgeon where they hurt. She went on to create Grace’s Sign, a toilet sign for those with invisible disabilities, so that she does not have to feel left out, offended or upset if people look at her badly when she comes out of a toilet that she needs to use.

One of the groups that helped her in Edinburgh’s sick kids hospital was the Teapot Trust, which Parliament knows of. The Teapot Trust was set up in 2010 by Dr Laura Young and her husband following the tragic death of their daughter. In 2016, Laura was awarded an MBE in the new year’s honours list for her work. Their volunteers and art therapists go into hospitals in Edinburgh and London to bring hope, trust and faith to children and their families so that they can engage with some of the most difficult periods of their life, not through verbal explanation, but through the empathy of art. As a community, we have moved away from that.

It is great to have this debate today, particularly following the APPG’s report, to show that art in its wider sense must sit throughout our community. It is for all Ministers across the Government to pay attention to this, as it is for all Members to promote art and to remind people that it is not about money. It is about society, empathy and the people that we came here to serve.

6.17 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on securing this debate. I also congratulate Lord Alan Howarth, who was the mover behind the APPG, and his team, many of whom are here today.

I speak from a personal perspective; I was a primary school teacher for 15 years before becoming a Member of Parliament. The children in my care loved art, drama, craft, music and sport ahead of all other subjects. There
[Chris Ruane]

was something primal about those activities that goes back to that first handmade in the cave. Every society appreciates art—even a baby in the womb responds to music. There is something primal about art and creativity and we neglect it at our peril. At secondary school, interest in art quite often dips down for young people as they concentrate on reading, writing and arithmetic. Once people enter their working life, it dips down even further for forty or fifty years until they discover art and craft in retirement. We need to concentrate on art and wellbeing in all three phases of life.

My niece, Nadia Wazera, teaches art and craft to blind veterans—our wounded warriors—and that is a primal way of repairing them. The size of the problem facing the country and the world is huge. The World Health Organisation states that by 2030 depression will be the “biggest health burden” on the planet. Replies to questions that I have tabled in this House show that 32.3% of 15 to 25-year-olds have one or more psychiatric conditions and that 85% of prisoners go into jail with mental health conditions. In 1991, 9 million prescriptions for antidepressants were issued; today, that figure is 65 million.

Health and to promote human flourishing.

There are lots of reasons why we are in this situation, including digital distraction, information overload, social media, advertising and the way that we organise our economy, but it is good to see both the left and the right—David Cameron, who wanted to measure wellbeing, and our shadow Chancellor in his conference speech—quoting Robert Kennedy’s statement that there is more to life than GDP: there is human flourishing. As far as I am concerned, human flourishing begins and ends with art, music, dance, theatre and libraries. It is not the icing on the cake; it is the essence of the cake, and it has financial aspects as well as medical ones. We are one of the most creative nations on earth, and we downplay that and make cuts at our peril.

6.20 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on securing this interesting debate, which is extremely well timed. The UK Government’s 2021 city of culture competition is in its final stages. I hope that hon. Members, including the Minister, will forgive me for once again shamelessly plugging Paisley’s bid to be awarded that prestigious title. Paisley has a proud track record of recognising the positive contribution that the arts can make to improving people’s health, particularly their mental health, and that is at the heart of our bid—more on that later.

It is now common knowledge that resolving an individual’s health problems often requires a multi-layered approach, because health difficulties are influenced by several competing factors. Hon. Members have spoken about that in detail today, and numerous reports have been highlighted, including recent analysis by the Scottish Government that confirms that cultural engagement has generated such positive outcomes and, if hon. Members will forgive me, I would like to spend some time talking about positive work in Renfrewshire that recognises the interconnectedness of the arts and health.

Although it is a national organisation, the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival has firm roots in Paisley. The festival, which is in its 11th year, is one of Scotland’s most diverse cultural events, covering everything from music, film and visual art to theatre, dance and literature. It aims to support the arts and use the power of culture to challenge preconceived ideas about mental health. The organisation states:

“By engaging with artists, connecting with communities and forming collaborations, we celebrate the artistic achievements of people with experience of mental health issues, exploring the relationship between creativity and the mind, and promoting positive mental health and wellbeing.”

Renfrewshire hosts one of the largest regional programmes of that nationwide festival. In fact, 35 events will be held in Renfrewshire next week, engaging around 3,000 people. One of those will be “Making Our Mark”, organised by Renfrewshire Disability Arts Forum and the fantastic Disability Resource Centre, which I visited just a few weeks ago. It is a music, dance and visual arts event whose organisers believe passionately in the role of the arts in helping to generate positive health outcomes.

As I have mentioned once or twice in the House, the great town of Paisley is competing to be named UK city of culture in 2021. Its bid is built on the impact that that title could have on the lives of some of Paisley’s forgotten communities. As part of the bidding process leading up to 2021, the town has galvanized a number of health partners to use arts, culture and creativity to promote health, recovery and social wellbeing. Dozens of local projects are working with groups of vulnerable people in Renfrewshire. To name just a couple, the creative recovery programme at Dykebar Hospital features visual arts, music and song, and the Buddy Beat drummers social inclusion project will celebrate its 10th birthday this Friday.

We are not proud of the poverty in some of our communities, including—but certainly not exclusively—Ferguslie Park, which again has been identified as Scotland’s most deprived community. Deprivation brings with it associated health inequalities. Paisley’s bid is built on the hope that we can use the power of culture to transform the fortunes of our town. We use art to create environments that encourage, enrich and empower people, and we want to be a shining example of the role that culture can play in helping to produce positive health outcomes.

Paisley has given so much to Scotland and, indeed, the world. I believe that the country should do the right thing and award Paisley UK city of culture. This has been an excellent and timely debate and I welcome the
cross-party consensus on the positive effects that the arts can have on health. I invite all hon. Members to Paisley in 2021 to celebrate its city of culture programme, which will prove that culture and the arts can help to regenerate a town’s fortunes and improve the health of the most vulnerable in our society.

6.25 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, as everybody has said. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), and the APPG and Lord Howarth for all the work they have done. The right hon. Member for Wantage set out the debate very well, talking about the way the arts can alter the morphology of the brain and make a real change. He called for a culture change in society with respect to the arts and their interaction with health. He also said that education was a debate for another day. I am not sure that the Opposition agree that is the case, and I may come back to that point. He rightly mentioned that Alan Johnson, when he was a Health Minister, emphasised that point, and he quite rightly called upon current Health Ministers to engage actively in this debate, which I also welcome.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) on making a timely intervention and on her recent work with my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on the Acting Up report, which was commissioned by the Opposition Front Bench to try to emphasise the importance of the arts—particularly access to the arts—for working-class children in the area of acting and across the piece. That point on access was raised by other hon. Members and is absolutely essential. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) very powerfully emphasised the importance of access to the arts.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), who spoke very lyrically about his constituency and the great work done there in the arts and health. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) gave us a psychologist’s insight, which was extremely useful. She talked about the way that art can give inmates the opportunity for rehabilitation. That certainly reminded me of the campaign that I ran in the last Parliament, when the Government mistakenly made a move to stop prisoners having access to books andwould not be a party political football, but accountability measures in education are set in such a way that they result in some of the statistics that my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen reminded us of. Between November 2010 and November 2015 the number of art and design teachers in our schools fell by 9%. That is a fact; it is going on right now in our schools. We have all said what a wonderful thing music is and what a wonderful contribution it makes to our wellbeing, and I include myself in that, but the number of students taking GCSE music has dropped by 9%. We all know that drama—my brother is a professional actor, as was my hon. Friend—is a tremendous outlet for our wellbeing, and I include myself in that, but the number of students taking drama A-level has fallen by 26% since 2010.

To conclude, I am going to call it out this way: in the Department for Education the Schools Minister, who has been almost a constant fixture in that Department, has been a blockage, in my view, to some of the good rhetoric that comes out of Government about the importance of creativity. At some point, someone in Government, a Minister, has got to do something about it—it starts at the top, it should be the Prime Minister—and has got to say that the pendulum has swung too far, and creativity and the arts are being squeezed out of our education system. All the calls we make for culture change will come to nothing unless action is taken on that point.

6.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) for bringing this matter before us today. I would also like to acknowledge the excellent contributions. We have...
Last month I visited the Koestler Trust, a great arts charity for offenders, to hear more about its work and the impact of its awards and mentoring programmes on the most vulnerable people. The evidence was that its awards and programmes have had a positive impact on the lives of vulnerable people and offenders. Last year’s annual survey of award entrants showed that 82% felt that the awards had improved their confidence levels. I feel strongly that we must continue to promote and support such work.

I am delighted that the impressive work of charities such as Koestler will continue to be supported through the Arts Council national portfolio in the next investment period, which is 2018 to 2022. I am also keen to host another roundtable discussion with arts organisations and the Prisons Minister to build on the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage in that area. My officials are working urgently to help to arrange that discussion.

Last month, when I was in the Lake district, I visited Theatre by the Lake, an impressive organisation that works with different community groups to address rural isolation. It was the recent winner of the Alzheimer’s Society award for dementia-friendly organisation of the year, in recognition of its special performances for those suffering from dementia. That is vital work and, clearly, many theatres up and down the country make a significant contribution to wellbeing in their communities.

I acknowledge that—we need to work to document it clearly, many theatres up and down the country make a significant contribution to wellbeing in their communities. I acknowledge that—we need to work to document it and to bring it into the heart of policy making.

Museums also do great work for people with dementia. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who is no longer in his place, the House of Memories project in Liverpool has had great success with the local clinical commissioning group and is now exploring how to expand that outside its area, possibly using a franchise model. The project has trained more than 11,000 health, housing and social care workers in how to use the museum’s collections to connect with vulnerable dementia sufferers, generating an estimated £12.6 million in social value.

Just the weekend before last, on my second visit to Manchester as Minister, seeing its wonderful museums and galleries, including the impressive Whitworth Art Gallery, it was clear to me how deeply embedded in the city’s health and wellbeing programmes those institutions are. That was a conscious decision by the director, and that sort of leadership will be needed if we are to get the agenda moving across our nation.

The evidence is growing, but more is needed. The Mendoza review of museums, which will shortly be published, has examined the impact of museums on culture and health, and I hope that that work will allow my officials to develop the evidence base about the impact that museums have had on many fields, so that it can be shared more widely around Government.

In the interests of time, I have to abbreviate my remarks, but I will just mention libraries, as it is Libraries Week; I will visit a library in Pimlico tomorrow. My right hon. Friend, who was formerly the Minister with responsibility for libraries, will be aware of the Department’s work with the libraries taskforce, which he set up with the Local Government Association. The membership of that taskforce includes Public Health England and NHS England, in recognition of the importance of public libraries in providing information and support to
local people. That taskforce has published a document setting out a vision for public libraries in England, which outlines an ambition for how libraries can deliver better outcomes for communities.

Over the last five years, the Arts Council has invested £41 million in the Creative People and Places programme, building supply and demand in places where engagement with the arts appears to be significantly below the average. So there is work being done on that and I can give the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) more details about that work later. The Cultural Commissioning programme, which is also funded by the Arts Council, is another important element of its work.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that the arts and wider cultural sectors can and should play a key role in addressing some of the most pressing issues faced by both our health and social care systems. It is also important to recognise that politicians, arm’s length bodies, health and social care commissioners and the sectors themselves need to work together to get this matter right. It is an enormous challenge, but it is one that I take very seriously and will take forward. I hope that many of the Members who have contributed today will help me with the next steps to take these recommendations forward and make the aspirations that have been expressed real, so that they can have a real impact across our country.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Mr Vaizey—40 seconds. Sorry.

6.41 pm

Mr Vaizey: Three things. First, I hope that the all-party group will get a response from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Secondly, the mood of the House is that we want a letter from the Health Minister, don’t we? [HON. MEMBERS: Yes.]

Thirdly, everyone who has attended today and so brilliantly contributed to this debate is now officially a member of the all-party group. So let us carry on and we will invite the Health Minister and the Arts Minister to our first meeting.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect of the arts on health.

6.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Unauthorised Encampments

1.30 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered unauthorised encampments.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to lead today’s debate following Monday’s well-attended debate in the main Chamber. I thank hon. Members for attending. I know that we are always balancing constituency pressures with the pressures of being in Westminster, so it is good to see colleagues from around the country, not just my own west midlands region, and from all sides of the House.

On Monday, we heard stories from across the House of how unauthorised encampments bring chaos to local communities and blight our green and open spaces. It is the impact on our communities that I will touch on, because that was the driver for my calling for the debate. However, on Monday we also touched on some other important Traveller issues relating to education, modern slavery and health inequalities. Those are equally important, and I think we all agreed that they must be considered as well. I also mention that the vast majority of Travellers live alongside our settled community in absolute harmony. I am talking about the minority: a small group who are making the lives of my local communities challenging.

I will focus on unauthorised encampments, how they affect local communities and blight our open spaces, how we can seek to prevent them and consider the process for evicting Travellers from these sites, and how we can come up with a new solution for what seems to be an ever-present situation. Before I begin in earnest, I thank the Minister for the contribution he made to Monday’s debate. I know that he, like many of us here, has first-hand experience of the issue, and I welcome his move, on to local parks.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour on securing the debate. She rightly talks about the issues facing Walsall; I read about them regularly in the Express and Star, because those issues affect a number of constituencies, including mine. I recognise that local communities are really affected, particularly when we see the Travellers coming on to local parks.

Wendy Morton: I absolutely agree, which is why the focus of today is that impact on local communities, local residents, and sometimes local businesses. It is often local community groups that normally use green spaces on a Saturday morning.

I was talking about the process and pattern that often seems to occur. Before it is evicted by a court order, we see the encampment simply move to another site. The Travellers set up camp while the council works on the eviction process, and just before the council serves the necessary order, the encampment packs up and moves on—often down the road to another site in the same borough—only for the same process to repeat itself. That cat-and-mouse merry-go-round comes at great cost to the taxpayer. Enough is enough. It must be brought to an end. It is time to seek some solutions.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I apologise, Mr Davies, but I will need to leave the debate early; a school from my constituency is visiting. I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. I am interested in what she says about this being a pattern that is repeated each year, I know that other colleagues will make the same point. Does she agree that it is helpful if local authorities actually undertake what they should, which is to secure a five-year supply of deliverable sites—and does she know whether her authority has done that?

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her contribution. I think transit sites and allocations are part of what is actually a much bigger issue. I will come on to some of those points later.

Mess is so often left at these sites. The state that some of the sites are left in following an eviction is quite simply a disgrace. There are masses of litter and household waste, while industrial waste is commonplace—the bricks or leftovers from building work. I have seen huge costs associated with encampments that arrive on private land and, sometimes, on housing association land as well. That money could and should be going back into our communities and into the services that we all value and want to see strengthened.

The problem is not a new one for the borough of Walsall, nor is it just a problem for my constituency within the Walsall borough; it also affects the constituencies of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and of the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). The issue has been ongoing for the last few summers, but this year things have come to a head. I believe that the local authorities try to act, but most of the time their actions are not quick enough to ensure that members of the settled community are not adversely affected. The Travelling community seem to understand the law and the hoops that the council must jump through before moving an encampment on, and each encampment seems to follow a similar pattern.
piles of garden waste, which often appears to be from work carried out by members of these sites then brought back to the encampment and dumped.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend: this is about the impact on local communities when waste is left on a site. These are recreational spaces—in my case, on Park Road football field in Cheadle—and are left in a terrible state afterwards. There is also quite a substantial clean-up cost to the community, which leads to that feeling of real resentment against the unauthorised encampments and the Travellers.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes a helpful intervention. It is often the waste left behind that creates the tension within our communities. On one occasion, I was due to meet a constituent at a site in my constituency from where an encampment had recently been moved on, to see the state it had been left in. Shortly before I left my office, the constituent called and advised me to bring a pair of wellies. When I arrived at the site, I sadly realised why I needed them: because of the state the site was left in. It is not uncommon for human excrement to be left on those sites. For members of the council’s “Clean & Green” team to have to go and clean up these sites is really not fair, not acceptable and certainly not what the council tax payers of Walsall borough pay their council taxes for.

Recently, after Travellers moved on from an encampment at Aldridge airport, there were, in addition to the waste we have sadly come to expect, four empty boxes that had contained TVs and even a car. Sadly, that was again left for the council to clean up. Surely the cost burden of cleaning up that mess should not fall to my local residents. Some councils are now successfully prosecuting fly-tippers, so is it not time to start prosecuting and fining Travellers for the mess that they leave in their wake? As well as the costs that come with repairing the destruction of public land and the clean-up of waste, there are wider societal costs.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Lady mentioned Travellers on green sites, a cause of considerable distress to residents, but such groups quite often also set up on industrial estates. They disrupt the businesses and very often there is, coincidentally, a significant peak in crime, industrial estates. They disrupt the businesses and very often there, to residents, but such groups quite often also set up on transit sites, a cause of considerable distress to local residents. Some councils are now successfully prosecuting fly-tippers, so is it not time to start prosecuting and fining Travellers for the mess that they leave in their wake? As well as the costs that come with repairing the destruction of public land and the clean-up of waste, there are wider societal costs.

Wendy Morton: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is remiss of me to have concentrated on green sites. There is much anecdotal evidence, as any of the constituents who have contacted me will attest, that with an unauthorised encampment comes a rise in antisocial behaviour and crime. Local pubs have had to close due to unruly behaviour. I have heard stories of local shopkeepers who have spent a weekend fending off fake notes, because even accepting one fake £50 note can wipe off a small shop’s profits for the day. Many residents have contacted me after their homes, cars and gardens have been vandalised and damaged.

On the August bank holiday weekend, one of my local football clubs, Walsall Wood, which is run by local community volunteers for children and young people in our community, fell victim to an illegal encampment. The 50 or so caravans arrived on Thursday evening. Local residents, staff and members of the club all contacted me. Understandably, they were concerned about the impact that it would have on the club, which had a series of games planned for that weekend. Due to a previously obtained injunction, the council was able to move that particular group on that Friday evening, but some games had already had to be cancelled that day. I think that some were cancelled on Saturday too, but most were able to go ahead. Unfortunately, however, the pattern continued, and that group of travellers simply moved down the road to Aldridge airport, where the height restriction barrier had been left open. They set up camp there over the bank holiday weekend.

Wendy Morton: I will come on to some of the powers and the need to look at the legislation later in my speech, but I agree. We have often seen examples of forced entry clearly having been used—for example, angle grinders on gates or huge boulders dragged to the edges, sometimes in front of witnesses. Does he agree that the police need much greater powers to intervene and move people on where that is happening?

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the measured tone that she has set for this debate. Does it surprise her that there are often examples of forced entry clearly having been used—for example, angle grinders on gates or huge boulders dragged to the edges, sometimes in front of witnesses? Does she agree that the police need much greater powers to intervene and move people on where that is happening?

The final example I want to touch on today—I am sure other Members will want to give their own—is of a convoy of caravans that arrived on the car park and surrounding areas of Aldridge community centre on 29 September. I am sorry, but the behaviour of the Travellers in this case was absolutely shocking. Members of the public who were using the community centre reported feeling intimidated. There was kicking at the doors of the community centre and someone had to stay there all weekend to provide security. Worst of all, human faeces were posted through the letterbox. What sort of behaviour is that? It is not acceptable, and yet that group was able to stay there until the morning. Understandably, we are left asking how that can be.

I turn now to how to deal with the issue. It was really interesting to hear from other Members on Monday, and we have heard some examples today as well about the issues that they face and possible solutions to these illegal encampments. There was talk of strengthening the law around sections 61, 62, 77 and 78 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. On Monday, there was much discussion of the Irish Government’s solution. Ireland has made deliberate acts of trespass a criminal offence and there has even been suggestion of a three-strike rule for the impounding of vehicles. Surely we should be looking to explore those things a little further.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. This was a significant problem in Ireland, but the Irish Government eventually legislated and Ireland
now has a law that criminalises acts of deliberate trespass, which, as I understand it, has significantly deterred illegal incursions in Ireland. Does the hon. Lady not feel that there would be real advantages for us if we were to take advantage of Ireland’s experience and introduce a similar law here?

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention; I know that he speaks from experience in his own constituency. We really need to look at this area of legislation. We need to look at the problems that we are facing in the communities and a little further up the line at some of the root causes. That is an excellent example and hopefully something that the Minister will take on board, as, to be fair, he did on Monday.

In February this year, the West Midlands police and crime commissioner held a summit on unauthorised encampments in recognition of the fact that we have quite a challenging situation across the west midlands. There were several outcomes from that summit, two of which involved working with local MPs to change legislation—I am conscious that there are colleagues from across the west midlands here today—and specifically section 62 and the notion of better protecting private business. It was a little disappointing that I did not hear from the police and crime commissioner regarding those proposals until I spoke to his office last month to ask for those outcomes, but perhaps these debates and my phone call prompted some action. At least we have some proposals, ideas and suggestions; they have to be welcomed as ones that the Minister and his team could consider.

Currently, section 62 can be used to direct Travellers to leave an unauthorised encampment only if there is a suitable pitch for the caravan, or each of the caravans, on a relevant caravan site that is situated within a local authority’s area. Clearly, for an encampment of more than 50 caravans, that is quite a challenge even for the police to handle, so we need to find a better way of addressing that. One suggestion is to change the law to enable local authorities to work with neighbouring authorities or with a wider combined authority so that Travellers can be directed to sites across local area boundaries. I urge the Minister to consider that, particularly in the west midlands, because Aldridge-Brownhills is part of the Walsall borough, which is geographically quite compact. It is not a huge borough. We are, in turn, part of the West Midlands combined authority. Again, I urge the Minister to look at whether there is some scope to make change there. I am aware that Sandwell Council has recently opened a transit site and Birmingham City Council is preparing a site, so perhaps consideration could be given to those as well.

John Spellar: As a Member of Parliament representing part of Sandwell, I draw attention to the fact that the number of illegal encampments has about halved as a result of the new site. Equally significantly, those that are set up are moved on quickly by the police. Might it not be an idea simply to change the law to cover a police authority area? That would simplify this for the police and they could therefore direct the Travellers to an encampment within their police area.

Wendy Morton: That is another sensible solution, which I hope the Minister takes on board. I know that lots of other Members want to speak, so I will press on and take fewer interventions to make some progress.

The wording of section 61 makes it clear that a senior police officer can direct Travellers to leave land if they believe that two or more people are trespassing with the purpose of residing there for any period. Reasonable steps to ask them to leave must have been taken, and one of the following must apply: any of the persons present must have caused damage to the land or property on the land or used threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour towards the owner of the land or his family or agents, or those persons must have between them six or more vehicles on the land. That is another good example of where the police can and should be using the existing powers.

We have touched already on the Irish Government’s answer. Without going over everything again, I urge Ministers to look at that seriously. However, as I said on Monday, we need to find long-term solutions, but my constituents are also looking for short-term protections.

Many members of the travelling community clearly understand the law surrounding the eviction process. We have seen that all too often in Aldridge, particularly with regard to locks missing from gates and sites being left open. That prompts the question: does the council’s left hand know what its right hand is doing? Could local authorities work more closely with other authorities to tackle this problem? There are also questions about how to secure sites so that members of the public can use them for the reasons for which they were originally intended, while stopping Traveller encampments springing up on them. Aldridge airport is a very good example of that.

On some sites where injunctions have been obtained, some protections have been put in place, but a Walsall Council report from January 2016 showed that further plans to protect 14 sites across the borough would cost just over £68,000. The report concluded that there is currently no budget for implementing those measures, yet the council has had to spend more than double that figure so far this year in evicting Travellers from some of the sites that perhaps could have been protected under the measures. I do sometimes wonder about the logic.

On injunctions, I want to mention at this point some of the work that Walsall Council has done. It gained a borough-wide order, based on the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, against persons both named and unnamed. In addition, it managed to obtain an order restraining the named defendants and persons unknown from trespassing on 12 sites in the borough. I praise Walsall Council. It has taken some steps, and some of my local residents now have sites that are secure but that they can still access. Sometimes there are calls for a borough-wide injunction, but I am not necessarily convinced that that is the answer. It does not really solve the problem; it simply moves it to another borough. The costs and difficulty of obtaining such an injunction would be massive and, again, would fall to council tax payers. Also, I fear that sweeping powers such as that can easily be abused. Negotiated stopping is another often cited solution, but again that is not ideal, either in the short or the long term.

I will move on swiftly and draw my comments to a close. Mr Davies, I would like to say much more, and perhaps the Minister will let me have a meeting with him in the future, but for now I will conclude. Unauthorised encampments are the single biggest issue in my postbag and email inbox. The issue causes anger and frustration.
in my constituency and, clearly, across the country. I welcome the Minister’s commitment on Monday to a call for evidence, because it is not good enough for public bodies just to gold-plate human rights and equalities legislation. It is time for us all to come together and for the police and the council to work much more closely together, using the powers available to them, to prevent these encampments from appearing in the first place and to speed up the eviction process. It is for the Government to look, through consultation, at the effectiveness or otherwise of the existing laws. No single community should be above the law. We need to recognise that with rights must come responsibilities, and with responsibilities will come respect.

Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. May I take it that everybody who wants to speak is standing? Everybody who wants to speak should stand. Just to let you know, 10 minutes each for the Front Benchers is the rule in 90-minute debates. There look to be about 11 people seeking to catch my eye, so I shall have to impose a time limit of three minutes on speeches. Keeping to that will depend on very few or no interventions, so I ask people to be disciplined; otherwise, I will have to reduce the time for speeches further and I would rather not do so if I can get away with it. I apologise for imposing a three-minute time limit, but that is to try to accommodate everybody.

1.55 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for the tone of her contribution and particularly for starting by saying that we are talking about a very small minority of the Gypsy and Traveller population. I would probably disagree with the way she expressed the figure of 13%, because that relates to caravvan dwellers and does not take account of the fact that three quarters of Gypsies and Travellers live in bricks-and-mortar dwellings. Also, I think that that figure includes encampments that are unauthorised in the sense of being on land that is owned by Gypsies and Travellers but without planning permission. As I said in the debate earlier this week, we are probably talking about no more than 1% of the Gypsy and Traveller population where there are conflicts in relation to stopping places and unauthorised encampments. For that reason, it is important to start with the statistics. It is important that people always address that matter, because it is easy to fall into error in talking about this issue as if it has something to do with a particular ethnic group rather than with a small minority of people who may be causing difficulties in local areas.

Just as the scale of the problem is often much smaller than indicated, so the scale of the solution is probably much smaller. A couple of years ago—I have no reason to think that the position has changed greatly—it was said that just 1 acre of land throughout England was needed to resolve the shortage of space; and once that is spread among local authority areas, it should not be beyond our wit to achieve. A combination of better and more permanent sites, transit sites, negotiated stopping and other things would become a virtuous circle: it would create more harmonious relations between the Gypsy and Traveller and settled communities, address the major inequalities that affect Communities, address the major inequalities that affect Gypsies and Traveller groups and save local authorities a great deal of money. We have heard about Leeds being able to save up to £250,000 a year by implementing such policies, through not having to go through enforcement action.

Of course, the history of Gypsies and Travellers and, indeed, their persecution, goes back to the 16th century, but the lesson of post-war history has been that where attempts are made—for example, through the Caravan Sites Act 1968 or through regional spatial strategies under the last Labour Government—to encourage local authorities, whether by placing a requirement on them or by providing funding for them, to provide sites, one gets better results than if, as occurred in 1994 under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act or, as is happening now by removing the requirement on local authorities under the Housing and Planning Act 2016, one creates a problem whereby local authorities drag their feet and do not step up to the plate. We all know that, so really we all know what the solution may be.

I am conscious of the fact—I am not conscious of how much time I have left—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): You haven’t any time left!

Andy Slaughter: I know that you will be absolutely judicious and fair in this debate. Mr Davies, but let me say just two things very quickly. First, between the two debates this week, we have had publication of the racial disparity audit and the indication in it that Gypsies and Travellers are some of the most discriminated against and deprived communities in the country; that is their status. Secondly, also between the two debates, I met a Jewish human rights organisation called René Cassin, which works closely with Gypsies and Travellers and settled communities to resolve disputes. I would finally say to hon. Members that, if they are having difficulties, they should go and meet the Gypsy and Traveller communities and engage people such as the Traveller Movement to intercede in those matters. These things are often soluble and often resolved.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I gave the hon. Gentleman a bit of latitude, because the clock is not working properly. People should look at their start time, because it does say when they started speaking; people should keep an eye on the clock. I will be a bit harsher in future, but I had to give some latitude.

1.59 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing this debate and introducing the subject in a very balanced manner.

We would all agree that the vast majority of Gypsies and Travellers are law-abiding. It is not them whom we are discussing with this issue, but the minority who spoil it for the majority. That is important to put on record, because too often these debates are labelled as complaining about the majority of Travellers. In Essex, we have had a very proud tradition of welcoming Gypsies and Travellers over hundreds of years, and that
is why we have so many sites in our county. The minority spoil it for the majority, particularly given that the view among that minority seems to be that there is one law for them and another for everybody else. That does not make for good community relations. We have to address this minority persistently and consistently flouting the rules and laws, because it creates tensions among communities. All we ask is that the law be applied equitably and fairly for all. If it cannot be, there is a problem that needs to be addressed. That is what the Minister needs to look at.

This debate is specifically about unauthorised encampments. Most people know that Dale Farm lies within my constituency. While I shall spare Members the full history, there was a long and expensive process even to get to where we are now, which at times sorely tested both my and my-law abiding constituents’ patience.

Given the shortage of time, may I raise a couple of issues with the Minister? I did send my address to him a little in advance. If he cannot answer it now, I would certainly appreciate a written response, but I look forward to his response at the end of the debate if he can. I want to thank my constituents for having written to me about this. I also thank Chief Inspector Sam Smith at Essex police and local councillors for the information they recently provided to me in anticipation of this afternoon’s session. They raised some important issues and, if I may, I will briefly touch on a few of them for the Minister.

There was general agreement that the current provision to close such encampments and compel people to move on is not working well. In particular, there is some concern that police guidelines, as regards the use of section 61 powers, are overly narrow. Unless other factors such as crime, general and antisocial behaviour or criminal damage are present, the police find it difficult to move people on. The legal process through the courts can be slow, cumbersome—it can take as long as a fortnight just to obtain a hearing date—and expensive. May I also raise the issue of sites? The police would make the point that transit sites are needed for short-term stays.

Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. The timer is now working so the leeway has gone, I am afraid. I call Richard Burden.

2.2 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), a west midlands colleague, on securing this debate. May I preface my remarks by noting that what I am about to say should in no way be taken as a generalised comment on Gypsy, Roma or Traveller communities in this country, most of whom either camp legally or, indeed, are settled. They face very widespread discrimination and must have their needs catered for.

The context of today’s debate is unauthorised encampments. The picture painted by the hon. Lady is an all-too-familiar picture to me, and my constituents suffer badly from it.

I welcome the Minister’s commitment on Monday to consult on existing powers. I hope that he will not feel constrained to say that all he will look at is existing powers. I hope that if cases are made for changes to those powers, that is not off the agenda. In the short time I have, I will ask him a few things. First, on timescales, roughly how long will the consultation take and when does he hope recommendations will come out of it? That is so we can all be satisfied that this is not an exercise of kicking the matter into the long grass. Secondly, in relation to the west midlands, the police and crime commissioner has done a great deal of work on this issue and has been working closely with MPs. Would either the Minister or one of his hon. Friends meet a delegation from the west midlands to go through our ideas in more detail?

Could the Minister say something today, first, on powers to prevent unauthorised encampments from returning to a wider area? We know that there has been some imaginative use of injunctions, but all too often those procedures are far too cumbersome and the powers are patchy. Can they be reviewed urgently? Secondly, can we ensure that the police and local authorities have the resources they need to ensure that the polluter pays? Those who create the mess should be held accountable for doing so. Thirdly, regarding working across local authorities, the hon. Lady has already said that there is a strange situation whereby section 62 powers can only be used within the confines of one local authority. That makes little sense and does not promote the kind of joint working across authorities that is needed. Will he look at our recommendation for either basing those powers on the combined authority area or some other joint arrangement between local authorities or police authority areas to achieve that? Lastly, in relation to transit sites—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I call Douglas Ross.

2.5 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this debate.

During my maiden speech in the main Chamber, I gave Members a tour around my constituency, and sadly I could give a similar tour around Moray in this debate, because all parts of Moray have been affected by illegal, unauthorised Gypsy Traveller encampments. In Forres, the first site when travelling in from the west is an unauthorised Traveller site at the Bervie Chipper. There are more on the way to Elgin. Across the coast, they take up land that is part of the Speyside Way, and the public are therefore unable to walk across that area.

It is unfortunate that time after time—in my time as a councillor, a Member of the Scottish Parliament and now as a Member of Parliament—constituents have had to complain to their local representatives about not only the formation of these sites, but the way they are left after the Travellers move on. Members have mentioned human waste being left. I have also seen examples of
illegal drug use and of needles being left behind, which not only have to be cleared up by council officials at a cost, but are sometimes found by members of the public— we can only imagine the problems if that was a young child—before being reported.

We mentioned in the debate on Monday the cost to local authorities, but there is also a cost to individuals, landowners and public bodies. I cited the example of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, which has had a lot of problems with illegal sites just outside Forres, and paid £10,000 for a clean-up. It found not only the mess that we discussed earlier, but aggregate taken to that site by Gypsy Travellers doing work and then dumping it there, rather than paying to get rid of it, as other businesses would have to do.

In my final minute, I want to speak about unfairness, and this genuine perception that there is one rule for the travelling community and another for the settled community. Like all Members, I accept that the minority are giving the majority a bad name, but I had a constituent who was refused planning permission for two chalets on a piece of land. The planning application was refused, because it went against four local plan policies and four structure plan policies. Years later, Gypsy Travellers bought that land cheaply to feed their horses and it is now the site of a Gypsy Traveller encampment. It is galling for individuals who feel that they cannot get their site developed because of genuine planning objections, that they are eventually ignored because an ethnic minority, the Gypsy Travellers, can make an application that is granted.

I am grateful for this debate, which allows all Members to express their concerns about this very serious issue, and I look forward to further discussions.

2.8 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): This conversation will undoubtedly be difficult, because it is about a clash of cultural norms: those of settled communities and their culture to aspire to live in one permanent place, and those of nomadic peoples. I want to challenge some of the things set out by the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). Regarding the conversation about antisocial behaviour, increasing when unauthorised encampments are in town, I would like to know whether there is statistical, rather than anecdotal, evidence to substantiate that claim.

Wendy Morton: I point out to the hon. Lady that the simplest way is to come and talk to some of the constituents in my community who have actually been affected. They will give her plenty of evidence and stories of their own experience of antisocial behaviour.

Laura Pidcock: I also represent an area in which the highest ethnic minority is Gypsy and Traveller people, in County Durham. I asked for statistical evidence to substantiate that claim, rather than anecdotal. There is antisocial behaviour in my constituency from non-travelling communities. Time and time again in debates such as this, complex social issues are racialised. [Interruption.]

I was about to say, before the objections, that I have heard many people say that this issue is about a minority. I want to talk about the presumption, which I have heard in this debate, that it is about our communities versus the Gypsy and Traveller communities. They are one and the same thing. If Travellers or Gypsies are in our constituencies, they are our constituents at that point.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) said that many look on trailers and envy how luxurious they are. Those are people’s homes. The average cost of a trailer is well below the average cost of a house. I thought that that was a particularly spurious point.

What do Members mean when they talk about dealing with the problem or the situation? Where do they suggest nomadic people go? I know that it is difficult and causes tension in communities, and that it is frustrating when a nice piece of land next to someone’s home or an unused piece of land is taken up by many trailers. That is difficult for communities, because they have expectations about what they live next to, but no critical analysis has been done of the structural reasons why Gypsy and Traveller people might end up on that disused bit of land. What structural Government policies have resulted in that situation?

I also challenge the presumption about gold-plating human rights. The report from the Traveller Movement, which is absolutely fantastic, sets out in clear language how persecuted such communities have been for centuries. On a number of social indicators—all, I would argue—the outcomes for Gypsy and Traveller communities, as well as Roma communities, which are not the subject of this debate, are worse than for others. It is difficult to hear people conflate antisocial behaviour, waste on sites and all the associated problems with a cultural identity. The idea that Gypsy and Traveller people should be mentioned at all is difficult. As I said before, antisocial behaviour in my community is often not due to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people. Of course, not all Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people will be angels, but let us not use cultural identity as a point in the argument.

There are solutions. Helen Jones of Leeds GATE argued—I think this was brushed aside—in favour of negotiated stopping, which rests on mutual negotiated agreement and a short-term social contract issued by local authorities. Unauthorised encampment is often the result of insufficient provision of permanent pitches, which then overflow on to transient sites, which essentially become permanent sites when they should be transient. Negotiated stopping would offer short-termism, with many conditions by which Gypsy and Traveller people would have to abide. Yvonne MacNamara, CEO of the Traveller Movement, agrees that negotiated stopping is a solution. The solutions are staring us in the face. Let us not allow the demonisation of these communities to stand in the way of those solutions. Let us work towards peaceful solutions for nomadic people, as well as for the settled people in our constituencies.

2.13 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Since Monday’s debate, we have had the shocking revelation of the race disparity audit figures. The absence rate for white British pupils is 4.6% and for Chinese pupils 2.4%, yet for Irish Traveller children, it is 18%. Some 97% of Chinese and Indian children stay on in education after age 16; 91% of mixed white and black Caribbean children do; yet 58% of Irish Traveller children do. This House and this Government face a big issue. Do we
prioritise the cultural practice of being able to travel—in itself, there is nothing wrong with that—over children’s right to an education?

Kate Green: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the number of children from that community in school, but it is not necessarily travelling children who are absent; it may be children who are settled but who find the school environment unfavourable and unwelcoming.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Of course there are children in settled communities who do not stay on, but she will understand that a large preponderance of Traveller children are regularly on the road. It is difficult for them to be in school regularly, and the quality of home education, if it exists at all—

Laura Pidcock: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: No, I will not take any more interventions, because other people want to speak.

As someone who believes passionately that every single community, including the Gypsy and Traveller communities, should have the life chances available to all children in this country, I think that we need to do better than that. The race disparity audit is a wake-up call. Many aspects of our planning and education system do not work for Traveller children, and we need to take that seriously.

I believe in the melting pot view of society. I believe that if we all live alongside each other, by and large, we can get along well together and have good community cohesion. A small story: two gentlemen came to see me at my surgery a couple of weeks ago about some local authority repairs that had not been done. I dealt with the gentleman who had a case, and took it up with the local authority. It turned out that he was a Traveller, in his 60s, who was unable to read or write, and his neighbour, who was not a Traveller but a member of the settled community, had come along to help him.

Is that not a lovely story? That is the sort of Britain that we want: people from different communities coming together to help each other. If that gentleman had lived on one of the private sites in my constituency, sadly, it is unlikely that he would have had a friend in the settled community who could have come along to assist him with his case. There are serious questions about the separation of Travellers, and I would like the Government to reveal more about the race disparity audit, and how the majority of Travellers who live among the settled community compare with those who live on separate Traveller sites. That would help the issue.

Sadly, many privately owned Traveller sites in my constituency are ungoverned space. The local authority cannot gain access without a warrant at times, and vulnerable tenants sub-letting on traveller sites. Modern slavery is occurring, and the police and the council cannot get to them to protect them properly in the way that all of us would like them to be.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): There are still six Members seeking to catch my eye, which will take us over the time allocated for Back Benchers. If everyone wants three minutes, I am happy to accommodate that, but I ask everyone not to take further interventions, to protect the time. At the same time, I ask the Front-Bench speakers to prepare to have just eight minutes instead of 10, so all the Back Benchers can speak as well.

2.18 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I echo many of the points raised by colleagues and recognise many of their experiences. We must remember that we are discussing unauthorised and illegal encampments.

Since being elected in 2015, I have witnessed illegal encampments on public land, land belonging to local schools, clubs and sports clubs and private land, forcing closures and causing damage and significant waste issues. The problem across Warwickshire as a whole is becoming more frequent. In 2013, there were 92 unauthorised encampments with 507 caravans, but by 2016, there were 139 with 890 caravans. The indications are that those figures will rise again in 2017, because there are already 121 sites with 1,099 caravans.

We must remember that for every illegal incursion, there is an associated cost affecting the local authority, the landowner or the taxpayer.

In three months during the summer of 2016, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council spent a significant amount—just over £22,000—on bailiff fees, officers’ time, court costs, legal action and cleaning up. Residents feel that that money could have been better spent elsewhere in the local economy or on other public services. Therein lies the frustration of my constituents and others. A challenge that needs to be addressed is the perceived imbalance in rights, particularly with respect to clean-up costs, that favours people on illegal encampments. If a member of the local settled community caused similar mess or damage, they would rightly be prosecuted or fined, but the same does not seem to happen on illegal encampments—the cost is met by the local people.

I had hoped to go into more detail on a number of other matters, but I will raise them with the Minister after the debate. We need to look at strengthening powers to protect private businesses and landowners, including schools, sports clubs, farms and businesses, which can be put under real financial strain. We need to look at reducing the time that eviction notices take and possibly at shifting the burden of proof away from the landowner. We need to look at prevention measures, because it is one thing to move people on, but as soon as an incursion happens, costs begin to mount. Finally, we need to look at protecting against people returning to land—particularly private land, but public land too.

I am sure that my constituents will welcome the Government’s intention to review the law. I hope that the Government will go further and take the opportunity to assess new measures that could be implemented to give clarity to the relevant agencies.

2.21 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Since I became an MP in June, two issues above all others have occupied my mailbag: potholes and unauthorised
encampments. Between February and August, our area had about one unauthorised encampment every 11 days. I second the excellent comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) in the debate on Monday.

I am concerned that law-abiding citizens in my community feel that the law is not on their side. That is a dangerous place for society to be in. They have seen their local tax money spent on some substantial and effective defences against illegal encampment, but that £150,000 could have been spent on other issues. They have seen the effects of criminal damage, and some have suffered the costs of cleaning it up. In a number of communities, such as Willingale—a lovely village in the north of my constituency—people have illegally occupied and built on green belt land, and the Planning Inspectorate has then awarded retrospective planning permission. Those communities feel that the situation is entirely out of their control.

Clearly, we need to do a lot to address the situation so that law-abiding residents are protected. I draw attention to the good work of our police and crime commissioner, Roger Hirst, who has created a Gypsy and Traveller liaison group with a single protocol that has reduced the average time for illegal encampments to be moved on from 10 days to two days. There is some good learning from the west midlands that we should combine with that.

I second the remarks about the Irish legislation on illegal trespass. I have also heard from members of my local police force that they have found closure orders, as defined in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, very effective for closing down crack houses, because the orders can go through the courts quickly. Act 2014, very effective for closing down crack houses, local police force that they have found closure orders, as illegal trespass. I have also heard from members of my community feel that the situation is entirely out of their control.

Clearly, we need to do a lot to address the situation so that law-abiding residents are protected. I draw attention to the good work of our police and crime commissioner, Roger Hirst, who has created a Gypsy and Traveller liaison group with a single protocol that has reduced the average time for illegal encampments to be moved on from 10 days to two days. There is some good learning from the west midlands that we should combine with that.

I second the remarks about the Irish legislation on illegal trespass. I have also heard from members of my local police force that they have found closure orders, as defined in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, very effective for closing down crack houses, because the orders can go through the courts quickly. They wonder whether a similar process could be applied to help them take even faster action against illegal encampments. I look forward to taking part in the review that the Minister launched this week, and I wish it well.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I am disappointed that the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) dismisses the issue as a clash of cultural norms. That does a great disservice to the Gypsy and Traveller community. I do not believe that incidents of criminal damage, environmental degradation, intimidation, fly-tipping and, in some cases, violence are cultural norms for that community; we are talking about a very tiny minority. As we have heard repeatedly in the debate, this is about ensuring the same rights, responsibilities and respect for everybody.

In the short time available, I will not repeat the many points that have been made, but propose to the Minister a solution-focused approach. We need much greater clarity about the police’s powers to deal with witnessed criminal damage, because they are sometimes unsure of their own powers when criminal damage is reported or even when it happens in their presence.

So much revolves around dialogue. As has been said, meeting people and talking to them is important, but it can sometimes be difficult to know who to liaise with. During the consultation, will the Minister consider introducing a responsibility for someone to be appointed to speak for groups of Travellers and to liaise with them directly? That would allow us not only to advance the dialogue more constructively, but to hold somebody genuinely accountable.

That is about holding people to account, just as we would expect members of the local community to be held to account vigorously for intimidation of, or disrespect towards, the Traveller community. We still expect someone to be responsible for a group of people involved in the kinds of incidents that we have heard about today, such
as fly-tipping. At the moment, nobody can be held to account for such incidents, yet the local community has to pick up the bill. That is where we are heading: a vicious cycle of communities being so resentful about some of them are very successful business people and so on. They live in my community and they are my constituents.

I was a councillor for 10 years in south Ayrshire, which is in the south-west of Scotland. Annually, we have Irish Travellers—they are primarily Irish, but not exclusively—and they have brought some difficulties and challenges to settled communities. The council has a Traveller liaison officer who assists Travellers, for example with education and cleansing, and we also assist them through the local NHS, but they still bring difficulties to our communities.

These people can be very aggressive sales people when somebody wants their gutters cleaned, or they can put pressure on people to have roof repairs, UPVC cladding replacement or tree pruning, for example. There is evidence to suggest that their prices can be quite high and the quality of work can be poor. Also, the people who are generally targeted are mature people living on their own, or elderly couples who worry about certain things. Another consequence of the transient movement of these people is that they take work away from genuine, bona fide, self-employed people. They conduct that work and put little or nothing back into the community. That is slightly off the subject of the debate, but it is all part of the package.

I have great friends who are settled Travellers. I think even Billy Butlin was a travelling person, and he ran a successful business across the United Kingdom—he had a Butlin’s camp at Ayr. So these people bring wealth and quality to the communities, but there are groups of Irish Travellers—they are in the minority, as has often been said—that bring challenges to the settled community.

There is a real perception that there are rules for some people but not for others. When they pitch up at a pay-and-display car park, they neither pay nor display, and they can sit there for four or five days. Sadly, they bring grief with them. I wish we could find a way to bring the Travelling community, who I have a great deal of respect for, and the settled community together.

Our local authority looked at 111 possible sites over a 10-year period, with assistance from the Scottish Government, who recognised the problem and offered funds to support us, but it is not easy to find a site that suits the Traveller community, who may wish to go to certain places. We also have a transient camp, but even if it has vacancies we cannot force them to go there; if they do not want to go, they will not.

I wish the participants in the debate well and I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) well in taking this matter forward. There has to be a solution to suit both parties.

2.33 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): In my constituency we have both private and local authority-owned Traveller sites, but those are not the subject of this debate; this debate is about the kind of unauthorised encampments that many of us will have had a series of, summer after summer. In my constituency many of these encampments cause significant disruption, misery and loss of amenity for local residents. The people in the encampments do not just leave behind rubbish; day after day, local residents have to put up with people defecating and urinating on playing fields and play areas, which is completely unacceptable.

As has rightly been said, part of the solution to dealing with unauthorised encampments must be ensuring that there is authorised provision for Travellers. Since switching to Conservative leadership earlier this year, Dudley Council has identified a number of transit sites, the first of which should be available by next summer.

However, as has also been said, we need a more flexible approach to the way provision is both assessed and made available. It is therefore right, particularly in areas covered by combined authorities, such as the west midlands, that those local authorities within the combined authority should be able to come together and have the assessed five-year supply of available sites at that combined authority level. Section 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 must then be adapted so that the police can deal with unauthorised encampments appropriately and move people to one of the authorised sites within the combined authority area, or preferably even within a reasonable distance nearby.

Of course, alongside the carrot there needs to be the stick, for the unreasonable and unacceptable encampments. There still seems to be a lot of confusion about the conditions in which section 61 powers can be used. Many police forces do not believe that it is appropriate or even legal to use powers that the statute seems to provide. We need more clarity on that and more agreement. If the Government can contribute to that process with new protocols that will not only make existing powers clearer, but ensure that any new powers that are added do not suffer the same risk of being completely ineffective because of the kinds of concerns I have mentioned, that would be a huge help.

2.36 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): As the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) noted, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) spoke of “gold-plating” human rights and equalities legislation. I took the time to read the article written by the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills on the subject of this debate, and I have to say to her that one’s ethnicity, social group or how one identifies oneself does not make one a better person. Human rights are not held because someone lives in a house; they are held because someone is a human being. And someone’s human rights are not lessened because their lifestyle is different from the lifestyles of other people.
Deidre Brock: Members frequently referred to the Irish answer—[Interruption.] I said very few Members—too few. They frequently referred to the Irish answer—[Interruption.]

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady must be heard.

Deidre Brock: Members frequently referred to the Irish answer, but may I commend the Scottish Government’s answer, which is to work with the communities to develop an overarching strategy to reduce discrimination against Travellers, improve their quality of life and outcomes, increase understanding through a national action plan, and work towards an increase in mutual understanding and respect in the settled community?

Douglas Ross: The hon. Lady will be aware that that document was introduced in 2004, updated in 2014 and again reviewed in April 2017, but we still have problems in Scotland with unauthorised, illegal encampments in the communities we have talked about today. That document is not working for local communities.

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, but the Scottish Government are clearly willing to work with those communities, and that approach will bear fruit.

On the question of dialogue with the communities, I urge the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills to join the all-party parliamentary group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, which I sit on, so that she can learn about travelling people’s culture, history and way of life. Alternatively, she could do the cultural competency training on the Friends, Families and Travellers website—I recommend that all Members in this debate do so—and perhaps learn to be part of the solution. We must ensure equality, end discrimination and give Travellers access to education, training and employment, health and social care services—they do not have that at the moment—and enough proper sites to camp on. Members of Parliament have a duty to seek to understand all of the people who live in the UK, and that duty is seldom observed. Perhaps it is time that it was.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) spoke of appointing representatives of the travelling communities to create opportunities for dialogue. In Monday’s debate, groups such as the Traveller Law Reform Project, the Traveller Movement, Friends, Families and Travellers, and London Gypsies and Travellers were mentioned. Extend the hand of friendship and those groups will jump at the opportunity for dialogue.

I am sad to see such a high turnout for a debate that, in my view, calls for the persecution and punishment of a minority group, whereas for debate after debate on subjects such as the Government’s shameful treatment of the disadvantaged and disabled, the Conservative Benches are largely empty.
Yvonne Fovargue: I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing this debate. Like her, I believe that the people we are discussing are part of our communities; they are not separate. They are constituents and fellow citizens, and, like other sections of the communities we represent, they are not homogeneous. About half of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community live in permanent housing. Other members of the community live on authorised caravan sites or private camp sites with permission for long-term stay. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) reminded the House on Monday, many members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community have made a big contribution.

However, as with other sections of society—as the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said—an unrepresentative minority is responsible for the issues we are discussing, and that cannot be tolerated. That is not discrimination. As an eminent judge said, everybody has the right to behave within the law. As with any section of society that acts outside the law, we have to act against those whose behaviour is unacceptable, but we need to get the balance right.

It is important to stress that we are discussing unauthorised encampments, with which there are a number of problems. They can lead to a deterioration in the relationship between those on authorised sites and local communities, who often do not differentiate between authorised and unauthorised sites. I have had positive experiences with authorised sites in two neighbouring authorities, where the settled community and the Gypsy and Traveller community came together to discuss the issues, and saw themselves as a part of a wider local community. The citizens advice bureau that I manage went in to provide advice services in that community.

However, it has not been as positive with unauthorised encampments. In one case in my constituency, the land is owned by the Travellers, but they are flouting the planning laws, despite there being vacancies on a designated transit site in the borough. Although planning permission has been refused, the site has been occupied, and an appeal is pending. The case has been with the Planning Inspectorate since last December, and an officer has not been assigned because it is “not a priority”. Well, it is a priority.

During that time, the relationship with the local community has completely broken down. Roads have been illegally coned off for pony and trap races, and innumerable horses have been left in public areas and near children’s play areas—on one occasion, one was tethered to a roundabout. Loose horses have been roaming across the streets, and one was recently killed by a lorry. Equine bailiffs have been brought in from another authority, fencing has been improved and the police have been involved—all at cost to local residents through their council tax. The length of time that appeals take is unacceptable. Will the Minister consider speeding up the appeals process and giving more resources to the inspectorate, so that these issues can be dealt with on a sustainable and long-term basis, which may lead to a reduction in the tensions?

There are processes for removal in other cases, but they are not always effective. In another case near my constituency, the caravan was moved 100 yards down the road into another field—again, despite there being vacancies on a transit site. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), I am pleased that the Minister has committed to consulting on the effectiveness of current laws and planning regulations, but I urge him to produce the report urgently, and to ensure that the process is speedy and less costly to hard-pressed local councils.

We also need to discuss the disparity between private and public land. The powers should be aligned. The additional requirements placed on local authorities that wish to remove encampments lead to lengthy delays and extra expense. If we align the powers, action could be taken on incursions in play areas, schools, hospitals—indeed, any green area that is in the public realm and should be for the benefit of all. However, if there is to be swift action, there must be a duty on local authorities to look at the transient sites; otherwise, people will simply move from one illegal encampment to another, because there is nowhere else to go.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield, and others who said that local authorities could pool their sites and make them available to travelling communities across borough boundaries, and perhaps even outside police areas. My constituency borders Merseyside and west Lancashire, and it may be that one of those areas can better provide for the Travellers’ needs. That would certainly help to make sections 61 and 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 more effective. Under those sections, the police are able to clear unauthorised sites only if there is a suitable authorised site for the Travellers to move to. If there is not one, the police’s hands are effectively tied.

We need to ensure that police forces have the power they need to act on behalf of the whole community, but the recent cuts to police funding have not helped the situation. The police can prioritise actions only on the principles of threat, risk and harm, and unauthorised encampments do not have a high priority under those criteria. We need to increase police budgets and powers in tandem.

I am not suggesting that Travellers be deliberately moved away from their communities. It is vital that the moves be made sensitively, and that the Travellers’ views be taken into account. It is also important that we incorporate such groups into the wider community, and that community relations are not helped by maintaining unauthorised sites—but that will, of course, require expenditure: money that hard-pressed councils do not have. If the Minister is serious about tackling the issue, the Government must invest in new sites alongside local councils. The Government may only need to provide a loan, because a council might be able to recoup the money.

Supporting cultures and traditions is important, but that can be undermined if communities become polarised and unable to work together with mutual respect. Provision of adequate sites, coupled with swift action on criminal behaviour by the very small minority, can only enhance and not detract from good community relations.
2.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and all other right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. On Monday the subject was wider, but today’s debate has been as passionate, if not more at times, than the one in the main Chamber. As I said on Monday, when people talk about illegal encampments, that is not lost on me at all. My constituents, too, have suffered significantly from illegal encampments over many years, but I will not dwell on that because my hon. Friend the Member from illegal encampments over many years, but I will not dwell on that because my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), which includes Bedworth, made pertinent points that reflect the challenges in my area.

As hon. Members have stated on a number of occasions today, the Minister for Housing and Planning has signalled our intent to seek an evidence review of the way that existing powers are enforced to understand what more can be done; I hope that reassures the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) about the challenges. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned the race disparity audit, and we should look at this debate in the context of that ongoing work. This debate is of great value to both those pieces of work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills explained in great detail the negative impact that unauthorised encampments have had on her constituency. Other Members have explained that as well. It is absolutely right and proper for them to speak out on behalf of their residents, the people whom they are elected to this place to represent.

The Government are clear—that is categorical—that the law must apply to everyone, and the police must address illegal incidents and give victims support. Local communities deserve to feel safe in their neighbourhoods, and tackling criminal activities, illegal encampments, menacing behaviour and other actions that threaten our society and way of life must be the core business for the police and local agencies.

Mr Baron: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will make some progress before giving way, if my hon. Friend does not mind.

The Government want to see those agencies working together to ensure that illegal incursions are dealt with properly, but we cannot sit here and say that the House can be complacent. That is why we will hold the review, which we look forward to progressing as quickly as possible, as I hope Members appreciate. Although the Government are carrying out a review of evidence, that is not an excuse for a local authority, police force or any other agency to sit by and not use the existing law to its full extent. It is important not only to deal with matters within the law, but for those matters to be dealt with so as to uphold and enforce the law.

My hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills and for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) discussed displacement and the cat-and-mouse game of people going from one area to another. I, too, do not think that we can continue to allow that to happen. The West Midlands police and crime commissioner was mentioned today and in the previous debate. Recently he produced a briefing paper, which west midlands MP’s have received, outlining proposals to deal with unauthorised encampments. Suggestions include transit sites, helping to unlock police powers and considering the availability of sites across a combined authority area, rather than in an individual district area. We can certainly agree with some of the suggestions and innovations, but we need to ensure that they are proportionate, and balanced against the needs and rights of the settled and the nomadic communities.

As I have said a number of times—I make no excuse for doing so—we must also consider how enforcement can be improved. My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) talked extensively about enforcement and his concern about how any new powers would be enforced, which is a critical point.

Members who spoke in this debate and the earlier one gave lots of examples of the law being broken, and of the perception that the police were unable to prosecute. In any community, there are times when lawbreakers evade the law, but we cannot accept that as the de facto state of play. Authorities such as councils, the police and local Gypsy and Traveller organisations should work together so that wrongdoing is dealt with effectively and punished, and does not tarnish a whole community through the actions of a small minority.

Members have mentioned antisocial behaviour. We should do whatever we can to deal with it and to address illegal behaviours, but we should also bear in mind that the actions of the few should not reflect on a whole community. We must consider that point very carefully when we look at what we do and may do in the future.

Today and on Monday it was suggested that trespass be made a criminal offence. Hon. Members have made strong arguments in favour of that. We have considered it in the past, but at the time it was thought that that would reduce police discretion, while local costs would still be incurred by the police and the criminal justice system. That said, there is no doubt that we will receive a multitude of views and suggestions, including on new models and ways to deal with some of the challenges, and we are open to listening to some of those suggestions.

Mr Baron: I urge the Government, as part of the review, to look at those cat-and-mouse games that are played by a minority, who might move no more than 50 or 100 yards, and then the whole legal process has to start again? That is one of the core problems of the police and the local authorities.

Mr Jones: I understand that matter.

I have to give my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills her right to reply in the debate, but I will first make a special mention of the speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Moray (Douglas Ross) and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). These matters are devolved, and my hon. Friends have raised
clear issues. They have been listened to by the Scottish National party Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), although from what was said I am not sure that their concerns are being heard. My hon. Friends will be able to see what happens with the review in England and take it back north of the border.

It has been a pleasure to respond to the debate, although I would have liked to make many more points and mention many more colleagues. The Department is more than willing to receive information and to store it. I look forward to taking the review forward.

2.58 pm

Wendy Morton: Time is short. I thank you, Mr Davies, for chairing the debate. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members from across the country who have contributed to this important debate. I am very encouraged by the response of the Minister. I welcome his review, and I am sure that I speak on behalf of so many of us when I welcome the chance to work with him to address this sensitive and challenging issue faced in so many of our constituencies.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered unauthorised encampments.

Free Childcare

[Andrew Rosindell in the Chair]

3 pm

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Is Ruth George present to move the motion? [Interruption.] I remind hon. Members that they should be here on time so that debates can begin in a timely fashion.

3.1 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effects of 30 hours free childcare.

I am here now, Mr Rosindell—thank you.

We are all here because we want all our children to get the best possible start in life and to be as ready for school as they can be, and because we want working parents to know that they can rely on high-quality childcare in a fun, friendly and caring setting that is nearby. Those factors are important to ensure not just that our children are school-ready, but that they are happy and relaxed and make friends.

I have four children, aged between eight and 25. As a mum who has worked all my adult life, I can vouch for how important it is for a child to be happy with their nursery or childminder. There is nothing worse than having to leave a child when they are crying or unhappy. That happens with almost all young children in the first few days, but they soon settle down, trust the staff, make friends and have a great time. The only thing worse than leaving a crying child is getting back at the end of the day and finding that they have been unhappy all day.

I have been lucky in the rural area where I live to have had excellent and friendly childcare nearby for all my children. We all welcome the consistent work to drive up standards in early years, so that 95% of providers are now judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding. We all want good-quality, affordable and sufficient childcare. Although the policy of 30 hours of funded care for three and four-year-olds aims to increase the affordability of care, the lack of Government funding has raised doubts across the country about affordability, quality and sufficiency.

Why has that policy been so underfunded? At the Conservative party’s childcare campaign day on Monday 15 April 2015, in the run-up to the general election, David Cameron said that he would create an extra 600,000 free childcare places if he was returned to power. That was certainly a popular policy. The weekend before that announcement, the Conservatives had been behind Labour in every poll, but the day after the announcement—16 April—they were ahead in every poll, except one that was tied. At the time, the BBC reported that Labour described the policy as “another unfunded announcement”. BBC political correspondent Carole Walker said that Mr Cameron was “likely to face questions” about how the Conservatives would ensure that sufficient childcare places were available. She was right about the questions, but not about the person who would be questioned.

The Conservatives said that the 30-hour offer would result in more than 600,000 extra 15-hour childcare places every year from 2017, and that it would be
funded by reducing tax relief on pension contributions. However, when those changes to tax relief were announced in the 2015 summer Budget, we were told that they would fund Conservative cuts to inheritance tax, not childcare, so the extra 15 hours of supposedly free childcare for 600,000 children were left without any specific funding. It is no wonder that the number of places has reduced to a third of what was promised in 2015 and that providers have been left wondering where all the money has gone.

Concerns were raised as soon as the projected funding levels were announced. Some 62% of all early years providers surveyed by the Pre-school Learning Alliance in March 2017 said that the funding they will receive in 2017-18 is less than the hourly rate they charge parents and less than the hourly cost of delivering a funded place. It is not surprising that more than half—58%—expected that the 30-hour offer would have a negative impact on their businesses, and just 17% predicted a positive impact.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the Pre-school Learning Alliance. Some Government Members say that they have had enough of experts, but does she agree that they should listen more to groups on the ground, such as my constituent Jane Reddish and her group What About The Children? Its excellent report on the 30-hours policy raises many of the same concerns as my hon. Friend, specifically pertaining to the special developmental needs of nought to 36-month-olds. The Minister would be well advised to meet that group, as the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), soon will.

Ruth George: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

A survey of local authorities by the Family and Childcare Trust in February 2017 found that only a third thought that there would be enough childcare for three and four-year-olds using the 30-hour offer, while a third did not know whether there would be a reduction in care quality as a result of the offer’ s roll-out. Some 44% of those local authorities said that the 30-hour offer would reduce the financial sustainability of some settings, so some childcare providers would go out of business. The survey found that the extension of free hours could compromise things that parents thought were priorities for high-quality childcare. That is important, because only high-quality childcare helps to boost children’s attainment and close the gap between disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers.

It was good that the Government introduced pilot schemes in September 2016 to see what would happen. The Minister has claimed that those pilot schemes were a great success. In response to the urgent question on 6 September from my hon. Friend the shadow Minister, when we were finally given some figures on the number of children registered for places, the Minister said: “If we look at the pilot areas that have been delivering for a year now…we can see that 100% of their providers are delivering and 100% of the parents who wanted a place found one, despite some reservations being put on the record…at the very beginning. The pilots have demonstrated that we can deliver and we are delivering.”—[Official Report, 6 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 163.]

However, some nurseries that were involved in the pilot tell a very different tale. The owner of Polly Anna’s Nursery in York, the only area on the lowest level of local authority funding—£4.30 an hour, of which £4 went to providers—said that he wrote to the Minister to say that although he was in favour of any Government measure to reduce the cost to families of their child’s early education and care and of any improvement to quality and staff qualifications, £4 an hour would represent an increase of only 2% a year in the 10 years from 2010, at a time when costs will have increased disproportionately.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does the hon. Lady recognise that an independent study put the cost of providing childcare for three and four-year-olds at about £3.72 per hour, whereas the average amount that goes to a council is £4.94—significantly more?

Ruth George: I accept that a study was done in 2015. That was before we knew the outcome of business rate increases and before we had seen the impact on the sector of the national living wage policy and of auto-enrolment. All those things significantly increased the cost of nursery provision and were not known at the time the study was done, so it is erroneous to use those figures for funding projections up to 2020.

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. The review of childcare costs was described as “thorough and wide-ranging” by the National Audit Office, so we believe we can base our costings on those figures. Does she disagree with the National Audit Office’s judgment?

Ruth George: In 2015, when those figures were done, they may well have been up to standard, but they do not represent the increase in costs that nurseries have seen in the past two years and certainly will see even more with the increase in auto-enrolment costs and the increase in the national living wage that will be ongoing up until 2020. They figures are utterly at odds with all the evidence that comes from local authorities and from the childcare provision sector, who have given ample evidence about their costs and the amount that they have to pay for the provision. In fact, a provider from the Minister’s own constituency wrote to tell him: “I ask myself do I really want to continue working as a childcare provider when my wage will now match that of a supermarket worker without the responsibilities of a childcare provider, the paper work, Ofsted and book work. I am sad it had come to this.”

The fact that the Minister claimed he had not heard a peep from providers about their problems, either in the pilot areas, or with the full roll-out, has annoyed many of them. Hundreds of providers have peeped to the “Champagne Nurseries on Lemonade Funding” Facebook group to say that they certainly have peeped.

Mr Goodwill: May I suggest the hon. Lady looks at the record of what I actually said? I was listing the pilot areas and referring to Members of Parliament in the House and the fact that they had not raised those issues with me during the period of the trial.

Ruth George: I am afraid I have copies of the emails from the providers in York and Scarborough that were sent during the pilot. They wrote to the Minister about
their concerns to do with the pilot that they were participating in, so there seems to be a discrepancy there.

Despite numerous concerns being raised from the pilot areas, national organisations, local authorities and the sector itself, the Government have pressed ahead with the roll-out. My parliamentary questions in July asking for figures on the number of parents registered and on those who had successfully obtained a place went unanswered. Local authorities were forbidden from giving the figures for their own areas, even in response to freedom of information requests, so we had a total lack of information on what was happening up until September, except for reports from parents that they were struggling to register on the website. We heard from nurseries that they were unable to provide the 30 hours and from parents that they therefore could not find places.

In September, in response to an urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), we were told that 152,000 parents had secured a place, 71% of those who had registered. Despite the contrast with the 600,000 places that were promised originally by David Cameron when this vote-winning policy was announced, we were told that this was a great success. But that great success story still involved nearly a third of parents who had registered not having secured a place at the start of term in September. Some 64,000 children missed out on the important start-of-term activities where children learn to settle into their nursery or childcare place. When they start late, they always feel as if they are catching up, as routines are already established and friendships made. I hope the Minister will now update us on how many of those 64,000 children have now secured their place, albeit late.

Nurseries are struggling. They have seen huge increases in costs in recent years, as I mentioned earlier in response to Government Members. Until June I was on the board of a non-profit-making childcare provider, so I have seen the costs for myself. I set up the pension scheme that sees employers making contributions for their full-time staff. Those contributions are just 1% at the moment, but they will increase to 2% and then 3%, on top of wages. As a trade unionist, I also advised on a wages policy to properly reward all the staff and give incentives for attaining extra qualifications as well as making sure we always paid at least the national living wage.

Paying better wages is an excellent policy, but it needs to be funded, and the funding calculations simply do not take into account the fundamental cost and the increases for every childcare provider. That goes alongside the business rates, where most nurseries have seen a huge hike. It is no wonder the National Day Nurseries Association, from its survey in September, said that the 30-hours policy was in chaos. It said more than half of nurseries had had serious worries about having to increase fees for paid-for hours to unacceptable levels, and even about staying in business at all.

Nearly 300 nursery managers and owners completed the survey, which found that four fifths of those offering 30 hours were having to make additional charges for food and special sessions such as language or sports classes, or trips out. More than half of the respondents said they understood additional services and were happy to pay, but a quarter said they were finding parents did not want to pay.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), the shadow Minister with responsibility for early years, has just chaired a panel with childcare providers and I have taken down some of the quotes from that meeting:

“The system is complex, long-winded and many parents give up”; “It’s not free, so let’s stop calling it free”; “We are making a £5,000 loss every month”; and “This year I have lost 25% of my intake.” Does my hon. Friend agree that such quotes mean that the system is not currently fit for purpose?

Ruth George: Absolutely. I am sorry to have to agree with my hon. Friend.

When almost 80% of nurseries have spent time helping families to apply for the 30 hours, and with 14% saying this had taken more than five hours of staff time per week during the summer, it is no wonder that nurseries are struggling. The policy has had a huge impact in my constituency of High Peak. We have seen three nurseries close their doors over the summer as they simply could not make the finances work. Others have lost out significantly, even when taking on additional children from nurseries that have been lost.

A nursery in Buxton reports that it has lost £19,000 through charging for the meals it used to provide over the lunch period and charging for the additional hours that parents took on top of the 15 hours. Deborah from the Serpentine Nursery says:

“Having run my Early Years provision successfully for 35 years we have taken every change ‘on the chin’, risen to the challenge and carried on without any significant recognition except our Ousted Outstanding. What other businesses are treated in such a shabby way!”

Flagg Nursery School, a very small village nursery just over my border, in a maintained setting, anticipates it will lose £20,000 a year owing to the lunchtime charges it cannot now make and the payment for the additional hours. The headteacher, Sarah, told me:

“Personally I think it is a great idea to offer 30 hours of childcare for working parents. We have always had children who have attended for the full week but in the past there was a charge. I just don’t feel that the hourly rate is sufficient and is not sustainable in the long term.”

In Furness Vale and New Mills, First Steps Nursery, where my daughter did some work experience, is now losing £10.50 per day per child. It says that if a child takes 30 hours a week, it loses £45 a week for each child. No wonder nurseries are worried about the quality of their provision. First Steps says:

“If we are to continue providing quality for children the rate given for funding needs to increase immensely. We offer our children Forest School and swimming lessons but in order to do this safely we have to have a high staff ratio. The amount we are given does NOT cover this and we are subsidising this so that the children can have the best.”

Flagg’s headteacher spoke of the quality of staff they could employ. She says that staff costs are the most important of all their costs:

“I feel that we ought to have experienced, highly qualified staff working in this sector as these are our most vulnerable children. Experience needs to be paid for though and underfunding could lead to children not being adequately cared for.”

Among my local maintained nurseries there was also concern that the extra 15 hours meant they could not offer places to children who qualified for only 15 hours. The head at New Mills nursery said that the initiative
significantly reduces the ability to address the needs of the most disadvantaged children, and was a huge missed opportunity; the assumption is that that was overlooked, and that the initiative was driven by the childcare and working families agenda, not by the impact of quality education on the youngest, and some of the most vulnerable, members of society.

The children with the most need, such as the socially disadvantaged, are not eligible for the additional 15 hours of funding. Being good at closing the gap between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers is the very thing for which nursery schools have historically been recognised. Social mobility is an important issue that is not addressed by the 30 hours—something that in many ways contributes to increasing the gap between the poorest and better-off families. There are not enough places for all the children with 30 hours as well as those who qualify for just 15.

The headteacher at Hadfield Nursery School in the north end of my constituency says that the Government have underestimated the number of eligible parents and there are not the places to meet the demand. She is trying to signpost parents to other local providers, because her nursery cannot offer the full number of 30-hour places so they are trying to share them with other providers—15 hours each. It is a worry that as those nurseries have in effect to offer full-time places now, the impact has, again, been to reduce the offer of 15 hours. Those anecdotes from my constituency are backed up by the Sutton Trust, which says that the scheme was not adequately resourced, and the new funding formula will divert resources away from state nurseries disproportionately attended by disadvantaged children. Kitty Stewart, associate professor of social policy at the London School of Economics, said:

“To make up some of the funding gap, a new funding formula reallocates resources away from state nurseries disproportionately attended by disadvantaged children, and they may in the future struggle to afford a qualified teacher. To remove this advantage must be expected to have negative effects on social mobility.”

It is not only nurseries, but childminders, who are affected. They are already struggling. There are now 24% fewer childminders than in 2012—a drop of more than 10,000. Childminders often provide vital home-based care for younger children, or children who would struggle in a nursery setting. One of the childminders in my constituency commented:

“I personally feel that as a nation it is presumed that once a child is in school. But it’s unlikely that the government’s policy to provide 30 hours...will provide this”

It is a far cry from the high-quality childcare and fully qualified staff envisaged just a couple of years ago by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, when she was Under-Secretary of State for Education. There seems to be no emphasis at all in the Government’s policies on quality of provision or of staffing, and that must be worrying with respect to children, progress with social mobility, and our future.

Underfunding of a policy that began with good intentions, although it may have been more about votes than quality childcare, is undermining what is needed throughout the country. I urge the Minister to look again, especially at the projected figures for the next financial year, now that the additional costs of business rates and of the living wage are clear. I want to thank all those who have consistently been raising the issue of the problems with funding, and especially those who set up and contribute to the “Champagne Nurseries on Lemonade Funding” Facebook group. They have been tireless champions of the best of champagne nursery provision, and excellent analysts of the impact of the funding levels.

I also thank the nursery owners and providers in my constituency, a rural area on which the policy has had a great impact. In small rural towns and villages, childcare, and the knowledge that children can go to nursery in their community and make friends in their area, without having to travel long distances, is particularly important. I particularly thank Kate Sebire, the owner of the [Ruth George]
outstanding-rated Sunshine Nursery School in my home town of Whaley Bridge, who has been bending my ear about the issue for many months. I hope that the Minister will meet childcare providers, listen to their concerns, and take heed of them when he visits the Chancellor for his pre-Budget discussions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Order. I advise Members that there is now a four-minute limit on speeches, until the Front-Bench speeches begin.

3.28 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I will definitely take only four minutes, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on obtaining what is a key debate. I do not doubt that she has had feedback; I have had similar feedback in South Suffolk, where we have excellent provision. It is difficult for me to avoid receiving representations, particularly from Yorley Barn, a beautifully located nursery in my constituency, in a village called Little Cornard. The proprietor, Donna Row, recently came up and made representations while I was dropping my three-year-old twins off at the nursery. She made the key point that she feels funding is going down while, as has been said, core costs are rising.

I want briefly to focus on Suffolk, because while I accept that many broader political and national arguments are made, there is a national funding formula by which our county seems to have been particularly disadvantaged. The sense of unfairness in Suffolk is compounded by what has happened with the schools formula over the years.

I want to quote from a couple of my providers. A particular issue in Suffolk has been the drive for graduates to run their settings.

Amy Jacobs emailed me to say:

“All research has pointed towards the positive outcome for children who attend an early years setting that is led by an early years graduate. Suffolk…were therefore extremely proactive in encouraging settings to employ graduates to run their settings. This was supported in the early years funding and we were paid £4.24 per child per hour in order that we could pay our staff…at that rate. She goes on to say that they now receive only £3.87 per child per hour.

I should add that this is something that all Suffolk Members have been working on, and I am grateful to the Minister, who has taken the time to meet us and go through our concerns with his officials in great detail. We also held a meeting at County Hall, for which unfortunately I was ill and unable to attend. However, again, the core point is that funding seems to be lower at a time when costs are rising, so we as MPs have been trying to understand exactly why that is happening and whether it is driven by factors at a county level or because of the national formula.

I will quote from one other provider. Cheryl Leeks, who runs Woodland Corner, said:

“As you are aware, Suffolk County Council reduced our funding for 3 and 4-year-old children by 11% on 1 April with only 7 week’s notice. Historically the rate received from SCC has been higher than the rate we charge for non-funded children—or additional hours. We were always keen to have funded children as we used to receive £4.24 and a block funding allowance of £550 per term.”

She goes on to say that only £3.87 per child per hour will now be provided.

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Order.

3.32 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing the debate. Though I now have the role of shadow pensions Minister, it is children’s issues that are closest to my heart. I considered it a privilege to work alongside the former Member for North West Durham, Pat Glass, on the Childcare Bill Committee when the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) was Children’s Minister. That Bill led to the Childcare Act 2016 and the launch of the 30-hour childcare offer.

The Minister then chose to ignore statements not just from Labour Members but from providers and charities across the piece that there was insufficient rigour built into the planning for the 30-hour offer. So it has proved to be the case. I well remember one particular exchange I had with the Minister about the need for flexibility in the childcare system, where I sought assurances that parents would be guaranteed the free care they required without having to subsidise it. We have heard how parents are subsidising that care. I was hoping he would legislate specifically to require local authorities to have a duty to secure specific provision to meet the individual needs of parents and guarantee that local authorities would have the resources. He said:

“I feel strongly that setting out in primary legislation a requirement for local authorities to secure provision to meet each parent’s individual needs will not work in practice.”—[Official Report, Childcare Public Bill Committee, 10 December 2015; c. 104.]

Sadly, for parents, we were right in demanding such a requirement because, across the country, countless parents and their children are missing out. Had there been a requirement, perhaps the many people who have missed out because they did not know about the provision or how to access it, would have had the support they needed.

This morning I spoke to the manager of the church-based New Life Children’s Centre in Billingham in my constituency, who told me that it had to coach many parents through the Government’s system, and that many others had lost out on their first three months
because they missed the Government’s deadline. Her colleagues at the nearby Billingham nursery also spoke of the lack of information provided to parents, many of whom discovered almost by accident that they could access the 30 hours. Perhaps the Minister could tell us what flexibility is being offered to parents in all settings so that they can opt for provision early morning, or at teatime perhaps, to fit in with their work patterns.

On the Bill Committee, we also discussed costs and the need to ensure that the fee structure was developed to reflect local need. We knew that costs were different in different parts of the country. I do not know what work the Minister did after that before moving to his prisons job, but funding is failing to deliver what is needed. We only have to think about children with a disability. People in my constituency and across the country tell me that they are the people who are having the most difficulty in trying to secure a place for their child. Again, during the Bill Committee I sought assurance from the Minister that the parents of children with a disability would not be disadvantaged in the system. He was confident in his response. He said:

“By having tax-free childcare and the high needs block, and also by having increased the hourly rate, we will ensure that local authorities continue to have the flexibility to target funding where it is most needed”.—[Official Report, Childcare Public Bill Committee, 8 December 2015, c. 32.]

It is simply not happening. His confidence was somewhat misplaced, as parents of children who have a disability are still the ones most likely to struggle more to secure nursery provision.

It is all too easy to say that local authorities have the flexibility to ensure that all needs are met. My understanding is that they do not, particularly when it comes to finding the right placement for children with a disability. I ask the Minister to go back, look at the extra barriers facing such parents and find ways to deliver for them much more comprehensively.

The early years will determine the academic achievements of children as they get older. I really worry about those in my constituency and across the country who come from the most deprived areas. They are the children who need the support the most and who are being left without the necessary support. I hope the Government will take a long, cold look at what is happening on the ground and take the necessary action to get it sorted out.

3.36 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this important debate. The issue of properly funded, decent childcare has a huge impact on families in my constituency and across the country. It would be good to be able to welcome the Government’s actions on that and their commitment to 30 hours’ free childcare, but I see, from talking to both parents and childcare providers in my constituency, that there are clearly serious problems with the proposals and how they are being implemented.

First, the funding is simply inadequate. The shortfall in the Government’s commitment is detrimental to childcare providers. Last week, I spoke to the manager of a successful and popular nursery in Enfield Southgate. She told me that the Government’s plans make her fearful for her business. The inadequate money from the Government will put a terrible strain on the way in which her nursery is run. She told me that parents who used to pay for her nursery privately are now accessing the 30 hours’ childcare, but the shortfall in money from the Government to fund that will put wages and staffing costs under considerable strain. She also told me that if she were to decide not to offer the 30 hours to parents, she would lose out to other companies that will be offering it.

That hard-working nursery manager feels caught in a double bind: does she offer the 30 hours’ free childcare and risk her business making a loss, or does she avoid offering it and go under because others, who doubtless feel similarly trapped, will be offering it? We know from the excellent research done by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) that the fears of that nursery manager are not the exception; they are now the rule. Research also shows that three quarters of childcare providers expect the Government’s policy to have a negative impact on their business; fewer than 7% believe that it will be positive.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance estimates that there is a 20% shortfall between the amount the Government are giving local authorities to fund the scheme and the actual cost to nurseries.

Worse still, the Government are proposing that funding levels will stay the same until the end of this Parliament, even though the cost of wages, rents, pensions and much more are likely to rise during that time. Why should nursery managers and childcare providers such as the one I referred to in Enfield Southgate shoulder the financial risk caused by the Government’s ill-considered plans? The proposal of free childcare is far from free if hard-working childcare providers are carrying the cost, to the extent of even being put out of business. That is not to mention the anxiety and disruption caused to parents and children when a trusted childcare provider goes out of business, sometimes at short notice. If the 30-hour offer is to be truly free for both parents and providers, it must be funded properly now and in the future.

The other serious flaw in this pledge is that it will not help those who need it the most. I know from talking to my constituents that many parents welcome the prospect of 30 hours’ free childcare, especially those who are struggling in low-paid, insecure work. However, those who need help could easily slip through the net with this scheme, not least because of the many technical problems that parents are experiencing. After having huge technical problems accessing the scheme, one constituent contacted me last week to say:

“This is the government’s flagship childcare scheme and it’s an utter shambles with no prospect in sight of a resolution.”

Even more disturbing is the fact that to be eligible for the scheme, a parent must earn more—

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Order. There is a four-minute time limit. I call Liz Twist.

3.40 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for her very clear explanation of some of the issues facing this sector and the concerns of many childcare organisations about the impact of the funding regime. We heard also
about the real costs of employing staff, which are increasing, and about the pilots. As late as 31 August this year, the Pre-school Learning Alliance was drawing attention to the funding concerns of many providers. I thank my hon. Friend for her speech.

I want to talk about a nursery in my constituency. Bright Sparks Nursery in Crawcrook contacted me to explain its concerns about the funding arrangements for the Government’s 30 hours’ free childcare scheme and how that will bring financial difficulties for the provider and have an impact upon what it can do for children. Bright Sparks has been established for nearly 40 years and has been consistently rated outstanding by Ofsted, as well as being very popular with local parents. The nursery tells me that it has always offered the funded hours and wants to do the very best for the children there but is struggling with the new scheme due to the lack of funding in the formula.

Bright Sparks charges an hourly rate for three and four-year-old children of £5, and the basic rate locally is £3.85. The nursery gets an uplift from a quality payment, but even then, it is short of 70p per hour, per child in providing the nursery service. Every child is accessing funding in the nursery, which makes a massive difference, and Bright Sparks is now having to work with fewer staff and be less flexible in the sessions it can offer, to the detriment of the families that this policy is supposed to help. As a term-time only, school-hours setting, it does not have the flexibility to recoup money through other payments and is really concerned about its long-term viability under this scheme.

As we have heard, many nurseries and childminders have already closed their doors because the scheme simply does not add up. Bright Sparks fears the impact of this funding shortfall and says that it does not want to be another casualty of this Government. It wants to carry on providing high-quality childcare but needs to meet its essential costs.

Having accessible and affordable childcare is really important to families across the UK, but a policy that does not recognise the real cost of high-quality nursery provision risks reducing the availability of childcare places near to where parents and children live and near to communities, and I fear it will be counterproductive. I ask the Minister to look again at the funding arrangements to ensure that nurseries such as Bright Sparks can continue to operate and achieve high standards for children.

3.44 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for giving us the opportunity to debate this important issue.

When a family are spending a majority of their income on childcare, something has to give. We continuously hear how we should be more economically stable in work than out of work, and I am sure we all agree with that. However, that means that we need childcare that is accessible and there for families when they need it. With wages stagnant, and dropping in real terms, 30 hours a week of free childcare would save the average family £5,000 a year. This policy is a positive step in the right direction for families, and I welcome it.

We need childcare that is affordable and people not being priced out of the market; childcare that works for parents, families, and most of all, children. Children learn through interaction, play and exploration, and early years education is fundamental for a child’s development. Every child matters—rich or poor, from north or south, from the country or the city; each and every one of those children deserves the best start in life.

I think we all agree on that, so why are we allowing parents and families to be priced out of early years education, when we all understand that it is vital?

We need to recognise that many families are still unable to access the 30 hours of free childcare. With cuts to local authorities and education budgets, the Government are, unfortunately, failing these families and children. Those children will fall behind other children in their academic, social and emotional development. With cuts and closures to Sure Start centres—I speak as a former headteacher of a school with a Sure Start centre—our most vulnerable families are now without the necessary support and early intervention that they could rely on under a Labour Government. The Conservative party said in its general election manifesto that, by September 2017, three and four-year-olds would be receiving free childcare, yet we have still not had a full roll-out of the policy. On top of that, local providers in my constituency of Colne Valley tell me that it is time-consuming to administer the entitlement.

We need to recognise that many families in areas where the roll-out has taken place have had issues accessing the portal to register. From the perspective of Kirklees Council, there remains a lack of clarity about what childcare providers can charge for as an optional extra, and what constitutes a condition of access. That limits the opportunity for local authorities to champion the rights of parents and families. Prior to the full country roll-out, those issues need to be resolved, to make sure that those families who can be in receipt of 30 hours of childcare can access it. We need a childcare provision that works for the many, not the few.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on her heartfelt speech, which was also accurate in highlighting some of the challenges that this project faces.

I put my cards on the table: I think this is a great project. It is something myself and other parties were excited about when it launched, because it is something that myself and my party have been advocating for a long time. I was consequently disappointed that the Government are trying to introduce what is essentially a Rolls-Royce programme, but not with Rolls-Royce-adequate funding. My fear is that, if we do not get this tremendous programme right—it is supported across the piece and across the political parties—for the sake of essentially 42p to 48p per child per hour, the programme could crash.

If the programme crashes, it could be a long time before it is picked up again, not because of a lack of will amongst the other parties—I know Labour has been pushing for this programme for a long time—but because the industry will be so badly fractured and morale so damaged that I am not sure it will be ready to pick itself up.
I believe that that is quite possible. Recent research shows that 56% of nurseries think they could be out of business in the next 18 months. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that a quarter are affected. If 12%, 15% or 18% of a sector closes its doors and drops out of business, that is a car crash. That is a matter of tremendous urgency, and I urge the Minister to get behind it and to talk to his colleague the Chancellor in the Treasury.

I know the Minister from my previous time in the House, and I have a lot of respect for him. I know that he is passionate about this issue. Although I am sure he will deny it, when he stands up at the end of the debate and says that everything is fine, it is all going to be cushy and nobody is complaining, I know that he will know that is not true. Knowing the Minister from before as I do, my view is that he would support me in the submission that that extra x number of pence—I know it is multiplied many times—would make a considerable difference to this programme.

I am aware of that. I would say to Stephen Lloyd:

Mr Goodwill: I know the hon. Gentleman is talking about pence, but is he aware that a 10% increase in funding would be well in excess of £250 million per year?

Stephen Lloyd: I am well aware of that. I would say to the Minister that if the whole programme crunches and 20%, 18% or 25% of the providers drop out of the business there will be no business for our children. Truly, I believe that £250 million split across that sector, particularly for something as important for our children and their future, is a price worth paying.

Time is always limited in these debates, so I ask the Minister to consider three proposals seriously. First, will he meet with representatives from the childcare provider and nursery sector, and also from independent providers? In my Eastbourne constituency I know many of the independent providers. They are Ofsted-tested, professional, trained women, half of whom, frankly, I see pulling out of the industry as independents in the next nine months if the situation is not sorted. Will he meet with representatives from the sector, both nurseries and independent childminders?

Secondly, will the Minister also commit to listen to those representatives and to explore how much additional funding would be needed to just make this programme work? We appreciate that it is early days, but there are always teething problems when things start up—do not even get me going on universal credit, or I will be here all day—and if the Minister met with the people who know how much difference the finances would make, that would be terribly useful.

Last but not least, will the Minister reconsider giving providers flexibility when they make that offer to parents? If they have that little bit of flexibility, they can put on the paper, “This is how much extra we would charge you; you would get this.” I will tell the Minister what happens when they do not have that flexibility: people have to be disingenuous, and I do not like that. I know a lot of the childcare providers and the independents. They are honourable people who care passionately for what they do. If they do not continue being disingenuous, what then? They will go bust—
Labour’s best commitments. It meant that, whichever party won the election, childcare was about to become more affordable and more accessible for struggling parents. If ever we should have consensus in an area, it is in this one.

As a parent of a nursery-age child myself, I declare an interest. I have also put three older children through nursery, so I can absolutely relate to the thousands of parents for whom the costs of childcare push household finances to the brink. As Members of Parliament we are all paid on very generous terms, but even so, when my youngest two children were in nursery at the same time, the monthly bill came to more than our mortgage, so the need to get this policy right is paramount. That is why I am so bitterly disappointed that the Government have failed to put their money where their mouth is.

I asked parents and childcare professionals in my constituency to send me their early experiences of the policy. Three clear problems emerged: first, local nurseries and childminders have an unsustainable raw deal financially; secondly, the registration system is chaotic and unfit for purpose; and finally, the eligibility criteria for the scheme are far too strict.

Let me start with the terrible deal that nurseries have been dealt and the dire consequences of that. The amount that the Government have given local authorities to provide these supposedly free hours is simply not enough. It does not cover the cost of wages, premises, utilities, food or learning resources. One outstanding nursery told me that it was losing £500 per year for every free 15-hours place. That will double to an impossible loss of £1,000 per place when extended to 30 hours.

Nurseries that offer the 30 free hours are left at risk of closure because they lose money for every hour’s childcare they provide, but nurseries that do not offer them are at risk of closure because parents will, understandably, choose to go elsewhere. Almost all nurseries are therefore being forced to cut costs, and it is children who pay the price. Given that there is a proven link between the amount that staff are paid and the likelihood of a nursery being rated outstanding, a race to the bottom is clearly bad news for staff, kids and parents alike.

The registration system for parents is far too complicated. My constituent Cat applied online in April. The nursery asked for her code, which had not yet been provided. That code took 10 days to arrive, by which time the nursery was told that it had expired. She has repeated the process several times now, with endless phone calls and emails, and is now anxiously waiting to find out whether her application for her child’s place has been successful. That seems a bizarre set of hoops to have to jump through to gain a funded place at a nursery her child is already at.

I have constituents who are not entitled to these free hours because the Government do not deem them to be eligible. They include John and Nicola Andrews from Dukinfield. John works full time, but Nicola is a trainee midwife. Although she works an excess of 40 hours a week practising and studying for the NHS, because that is unpaid, she is not deemed to be a fit candidate for free childcare. This woman is working hard in a valued public service, but we are not going to help her with her childcare—Minister, that is wrong.

Likewise, I have constituents not in work who would like to return but cannot apply for jobs and attend interviews without childcare being in place. We should simply be offering free hours to parents whether they are in work or not, which is the Labour party policy and should become the Government’s policy too.

Minister, please listen to these concerns. Do not hide behind reports from two years ago. This is a mess and it needs to be sorted out for a better deal for parents, providers and, most importantly, children up and down this country.

4 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Obviously, everyone in this room welcomes the expansion of childcare to 30 hours, but we are hearing that entitlement to that is only if someone is already working. As the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) said, if someone is trying to get work they get caught in this trap where they cannot accept a job because they do not know whether they will be able to organise childcare.

That is one of the differences with the Scottish scheme, which also aims to provide 30 hours; but that is 30 hours across the board, whether someone is working or not. Our approach is partly to help more people into work, but is particularly about looking at it as early learning rather than just childcare. We all face the attainment gap, particularly in the most deprived areas, and lots of research shows that it is already embedded when a child enters primary school. We blame primary and secondary schools for trying to swim against the tide. The aim is that all three and four-year-olds will have 30 hours of accredited nursery places. That is also for vulnerable two-year-olds, because the earlier we can interact with those children, the more we can try to make up for the situation that they find themselves in.

Alex Cunningham: I welcome what the hon. Lady says about the need for early learning as opposed to babysitting. She will recognise that the Sure Start system that we developed in England was a tremendous success. We are now seeing the data, with headteachers saying that the children arriving in school are more equipped and school-ready than ever before—all the more reason why we must get this policy right as well.

Dr Whitford: There is no question about that. My son was in the first year of a four-year entry. The teacher noticed a difference in not having children crying and wetting themselves, totally shocked at being at school, because they had already had a gentle year in nursery. Therefore, when they started school, they went straight into learning. That is available earlier: we have it for three and four-year-olds. However, at the moment, 16 hours is not enough for people and it is not flexible enough. Increasing that to 30 hours and putting it across the board means that more women in particular can use it to get into work, by having it in place already, and we can invest in the early years development of our children.

Any of us with children know that raising them is expensive, and unfortunately families have taken quite a big hit. With the reduction in things such as tax credits—the limitation to the first two children, for example—it has never been harder for families. It is often forgotten that tax credits are for people who work, not for people who are unemployed. We often seem to forget that in these debates. There are many hard-working families who are struggling. As mentioned by the hon. Member for Colne
Valley (Thelma Walker), this could save up to £5,000 a year. That is a significant difference; but it is only a difference if someone can find a place. Therefore, if half the nurseries shut, it will be an almighty crisis. If parents have to pay for meals and other trimmings around the edges of the nursery, it is not free at all. In fact people will be hit by that who would not previously have been hit, so some people will be worse off.

We are doubling the funding. The minimum in Scotland will be £4.30 an hour; and the average will be £4.94 an hour, because ours is predicated on the real living wage, not the national living wage. That is the other thing when we talk about entitlement and the quality of nursery education. If there is just a revolving door of people who put up with it and put up with the low wages until they can get something better, we will never grow a profession that is aimed at developing the early years of our children.

We need to get ready for this. Obviously, we are having to expand this out—we need far more places than we have at the moment—so this will be workforce skills development funding. We need more diversity. Some 96% of those who work in early years are women. There are many children who have no good male role models in their lives, and we need to get more men into nursery and primary school to help to provide that. We should have a diverse workforce. There is funding to bring in over 400 more graduates to our nursery provision, so this will be workforce going ahead. Many Members have mentioned the importance of the 30 hours for nothing or less than nothing. If they have a job that has antisocial hours, long hours or is all spread at one end of the week, we need to have that flexibility. That will not achieve what we are setting out. It is important that there is that investment in the workforce.

The most important thing is the empowerment of women to get back to work. That can get women out of the poverty trap. We already save them money. We in Scotland have the highest employment and lowest unemployment rate among women, but there are still women trapped. I remember offering a job to a woman recently. When she looked at all the sums, it was not doable, and the big piece that held her back was her childcare. That will be happening all over the place. This has to be dealt with. In Scotland we have 14 pilots on flexibility going ahead. Many Members have mentioned how inflexible the system is.

I worked as a senior registrar, as a surgeon. I was the first flexible surgical trainee in Scotland. I was paid 21 hours; I worked 50. That is fairly standard in the NHS. By the time I paid a nanny, because I needed to be on the ward shortly after seven, I took home less than £4.30 an hour, and the average will be £4.94 an hour, because ours is predicated on the real living wage, not the national living wage. That is the other thing when we talk about entitlement and the quality of nursery education. If there is just a revolving door of people who put up with it and put up with the low wages until they can get something better, we will never grow a profession that is aimed at developing the early years of our children.

We have all these brains across the country; people with talent, who have been highly educated. We spend maybe a decade bringing up our children and then do not get back into the workplace. We do not have wraparound childcare for school. We need to invest in women because they are also part of the country’s future economy.

There are things that we are trying to do in Scotland. Things are being discussed here. But if we are going to do this, we have to do it properly.

4.7 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this much needed debate. We have heard some interesting and important contributions. I will just go through a few of them; unfortunately, time does not allow me to mention everyone.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak powerfully claimed that the pilot schemes were not actually working as the press said, and that there were nursery closures. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) acknowledged that there is a problem and tried to understand why. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) would like to meet the Minister and providers. We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). We also heard a powerful statement by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—I look forward to my invitation to Scotland. We also heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), who gave all sorts of information about portal difficulties and nursery managers saying that they will be closing.

We have had a wide-ranging debate, so I am going to use my contribution to touch on the most pressing issues. I hope that the Minister will use his closing remarks to answer in detail—regrettably, getting clear information from him to date has been slightly challenging to say the least—because both the Labour party and the Conservatives agree that we need more funded childcare. I stress that the problems raised with the policy are not because we disagree with the policy in principle. However, nearly as soon as David Cameron announced the offer at the 2015 general election, worries that it was underfunded came to light. The Government pushed on the delivery, and the voice of concern about the potential impact became louder.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance found a 20% funding shortfall. The Social Market Foundation and the New Economics Foundation have said that this version of free childcare is regressive. Research from CeeDA shows that nearly half the childcare settings are currently recruiting staff, but four out of five say that they are struggling to fill vacancies. If this were any other industry, we would be talking about a recruitment crisis. The Sutton Trust has warned that, as it stands, the 30 hours of free childcare offer widens the gap between disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers before they start school, as it benefits wealthier families. The Social Market Foundation shows that of the extra money that the Government are pumping into early years, 75% is...
being spent on the top 50% of earners and less than 3% will go to the most disadvantaged. Many providers have left or are in the process of leaving the sector. Will the Minister include in his summation how many Ofsted good or outstanding providers have left the sector in the past six months?

We are now well into the first term of this policy, and the Minister has told us that 216,384 parents have their codes for this term. However, just last night he told me via a written answer that 71% of parents had had their codes validated, but the Department for Education claims that the figure is now 90%, so which is it? Do we take the Minister’s word or the Department’s? I would welcome an intervention if he could clarify which is correct. If the figure is 90%, that leaves 20,000 children without a place during this August term, which will obviously be the quietest, as more children come of age later in the year. Does the Minister share our concern that the sector will struggle to provide places as the year rolls on, because of lack of funding?

We have talked about signing-up codes. To deal with an eligibility code, the application system has to be fit for purpose, which it clearly was not as the August deadline approached. The system’s inadequacies have left parents stranded. There is confusion between Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and local authorities as to when the deadline for validating the code is. A constituent of mine has a code that is eligible until 7 December, but as she did not receive the code until 15 September the local authority has said that it cannot fund her place, and all the while HMRC is telling her that there is no problem and that she should be receiving her place. There is no clarity even on issues as simple as the deadline. It seems like amateur hour to me.

Variations from local authority to local authority are becoming a theme, with one authority planning to retain some disability access funding even though that should be passed on in full to providers. Another local authority is charging a provider for every minute that parents dropped off late and collected early, with the charges amounting to £4,000. Others require all providers offering funded places to receive an annual visit from the local authority’s early years team, which is what we all thought Ofsted was supposed to be there for. Getting payment out of local authorities is proving a struggle. Issues include refusing to pay monthly, bringing headcounts forward at short notice and requiring new email addresses and bank accounts in order for payments to be received.

The Minister knows full well that that is not an acceptable way to treat small businesses and microbusinesses. An issue that I have raised with him is that settings will charge for extras such as trips out, nappies and lunches in order to pay their staff and keep the lights on—to stay afloat. Can he guarantee today that there will not emerge a two-tier system whereby parents who cannot afford to pay for the extras do not have access to the policy? Does the Department intend to monitor the additional charges placed on parents, and will he commit to reporting on that? Will he consider a cap on those charges, or will it be a case of parents who cannot afford the extras being sent to the end of the waiting list?

If there is one thing noticeable by its absence, it is that the Minister never wants to talk about the quality of childcare. The Labour party has a policy to move to a graduate-led workforce and to put child outcomes at the heart of early years policy, by funding our policies properly. It is curious to me that the Conservatives do not have the same goals. Often, the highest-quality provision comes in the form of maintained nursery schools, many of which are seeing numbers drop, as they cannot offer 30 hours because of the cost of lunch provision. Nursery schools, which are often in the most deprived areas, provide excellent care, closing the gap between the most deprived children and those more fortunate.

Many children from deprived communities currently have access to quality nursery schools that employ qualified nursery school teachers. Those schools do a tremendous job of enhancing those children’s life chances, but they assure me that they will not be able to fund the continued employment of those qualified teachers. It is important that we distinguish between childcare and early years education. Save the Children is concerned that 40% of nurseries that took part in the pilot reported a loss in profits and, therefore, a threat to their sustainability. When I asked how many children were registered with maintained nursery schools for this academic year, the Minister was unwilling to share that information. Will he do so today?

When the Minister last spoke in the Chamber, he mentioned that he would like to get the 5,500 dormant childminders “back into that business”, but how will he do that if their wraparound care is not necessarily part of the 30 hours provision? Childminders are often highly qualified women with a level 3 national vocational qualification who have been Ofsted-assessed. I have been told categorically by a number of constituents that the county council funding provided means that they will go bankrupt. They are just going to throw in the towel—why bother?

I encourage the Minister to think again about a major injustice to childminders in this roll-out. His Department has relaxed the parent-child ratio for childminders who provide wraparound care. Is it the Government’s intention to relax that further in an attempt to make the funding work? Is that the way forward for childminders? How many freelance working parents have been excluded from the entitlement because they cannot guarantee that they will work more than 16 hours a week on the national minimum wage? The reality for many working parents in my constituency is that their employers will not guarantee them those hours, and nor can they, which makes it even harder for parents to return to work.

In the Chamber, the Minister said:
“There are colleagues in the House from places such as York, Northumberland”—he goes on to list them—

“which have been in the pilot for a year. I have not heard a peep from anyone saying that the scheme is not working, so obviously the pilot has been successful.”—*[Official Report, 6 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 173.]

As my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak mentioned, those nurseries are having trouble squaring the circle. When papers, experts, providers and think-tanks all say that the policy is not sufficiently funded to work, surely it is time to reassess and ramp up the finances so that it is properly funded?

I have been startled by the number of providers who have said to me that they will not be able to take on children who need extra support. If such a child presented,
they would put the child on a waiting list or gently suggest that there might be a better setting for them. That is discriminatory, but not unexpected when nurseries are budgeting to try to stay afloat, rather than to offer the best, most comprehensive service.

In conclusion, there is little doubt that the 30 free hours of childcare will be a welcome relief to many parents. It will bring childcare costs down for many parents, particularly at the upper end of the income scale, as research by Nursery World and the Resolution Foundation found recently. However, there is no getting away from the fact that this policy is chronically underfunded. No matter which way we look at it, providers are going to pay the price. The sector is known for its quality and passion—it transforms young people’s lives—and if the Government put that in peril with this policy, I suspect that they will not be forgiven lightly. As the Minister is well aware, tens of childcare providers are in this Chamber who would like to hear his views. Will he rethink his offer to come and meet them, as he originally intended?

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Does the hon. Member for High Peak wish to exercise a short right of reply at the end?

Ruth George: Yes, if there is time.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): I will make time for the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) to respond. I congratulate her on securing this important debate and thank her for contributing to the debate on the urgent question on 6 September about the 30 hours of free childcare. I welcome her involvement in the all-party group on childcare and early education, and look forward to attending its meetings in due course.

I almost feel as if I am living in a parallel universe. I spend a lot of time visiting nurseries; indeed, yesterday I met someone who owns six nurseries in the south of England that are engaged with the scheme and delivering childcare on the basis of it.

Tracy Brabin: I think I mentioned the parallel universe to the Minister in the Chamber. The nursery provider in his example has six nurseries and may be able to square the circle, but we are also concerned about the smaller providers.

Mr Goodwill: Precisely. Indeed, the proprietors of many smaller providers often work in their nursery, so their costs are not necessarily higher.

There has been some confusion about the number of children who are eligible. Children become eligible as they turn three. We predicted that there would be approximately 200,000 eligible children in September, followed by another 100,000 or so after Christmas and Easter. Those are the figures that we have always borne in mind. We also estimated that only about 75% of parents would apply for the scheme—a similar figure to the proportion of more disadvantaged families who apply for the free 15 hours of care for two-year-olds.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: I want to make some progress. A lot of points have been made in the debate, and I would like to answer some of them.

I am sure that all hon. Members present join me in acknowledging that, for many families with young children, childcare is not just an issue, but the issue. In many cases, the costs of childcare are a huge barrier to work, particularly for those in lower-paid jobs. Some parents still spend over a third of their take-home pay on childcare—and when I say childcare, I mean good-quality early years educational experiences. Indeed, 93% of the delivery is good or outstanding.

The Government’s priority is to ensure that parents who want to work after having children can do so, and that the cost of childcare is not a barrier. We therefore delivered in September on our promise to double the free childcare available for working parents of three and four-year-olds. We are also supporting parents with childcare costs, through working tax credits and universal credit—where up to 85% of the costs are covered—and tax-free childcare, which provides a 20% subsidy that is worth up to £2,000 per child per year and up to £4,000 per year for disabled children. That answers the point made by the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) about particular help for disabled children.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: I have very little time left, so I will make some progress now and give way at the end if I have time.

The Government are committed to giving every child the best start in life, whether their parents work or not. The 30 hours of free childcare are helping the lowest-paid working parents to manage their finances and have more money left over for their children’s needs. A lone parent needs to earn only around £6,500 a year to access the 30 hours of free childcare. Parents can apply for the 30 hours if they have a job offer; in answer to the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), I can confirm that we can issue a code on the basis of a job offer even when Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has no track record of a person’s income.

Dr Whitford: The problem is that a job may start quite quickly. Having a ticket does not mean that someone has found a place. That is the advantage of already being in a place.

Mr Goodwill: As the hon. Lady points out, we have tranches of entry, so anyone who has an offer in August for a job that will start in September could get a code. The situation is similar for people who want more hours. We have been as flexible as possible in ensuring that those codes can be given. We take people’s word for it that their job offer is real, but when they confirm the code it becomes apparent.

This provision builds on the existing 15 hours a week of high-quality early learning that workless households of two, three and four-year-olds are entitled to. We know that starting education early makes a difference to long-term attainment and earnings, and that work is
the best route out of poverty to transform children’s life chances. I heard this week from a school principal who had supported parents of two-year-olds getting the free hours to retrain and take up employment when their child became eligible for 30 hours. That is a fantastic outcome from a programme in its infancy. The 30 hours is making a real difference.

Jonathan Reynolds: I cannot believe that the Minister is not receiving representations that list the problems with this policy. Let me give him an example that I could not fit into my speech in the time available: my children’s school is ending free provision for under-fours, because the funding simply does not work as it has worked in the past. There is actually a net reduction in provision. Is he honestly saying that he is not receiving messages like that from around the country?

Mr Goodwill: I am surprised to hear that from the hon. Gentleman, because Tameside council in his area received a 25% increase in the hourly rate given after our review. We are putting our money where our mouth is.

As hon. Members will know, we rolled out the policy with a pilot that delivered for 15,000 children, and on 1 September, we rolled it out nationally, so that all eligible parents could join the 15,000 families in our pilot areas already benefiting from 30 hours. As expected, demand for the 30 hours offer has been high, and more than 216,000 parents have successfully received eligibility codes for the autumn term. I am pleased to be able to update the House: 90% of those codes have been checked by a provider on behalf of a parent seeking a 30 hours place. That is up 19 percentage points from 71% when I last reported, which is fantastic progress.

Of course, that figure may still continue to increase slightly, but I want to be clear that I do not expect it to reach 100%, because we cannot predict parents’ choices and situation. People’s circumstances will change. Not every person who successfully applied for a 30-hours code will decide to seek a free place for their three or four-year-old. Some parents will want to stick with a provider who does not offer 30 hours; other parents who applied for tax-free childcare and were eligible for 30 hours and who were issued a code will not want to take up that place because they might use the tax-free childcare offer. The figure may increase slightly, and I will keep the House updated.

Alex Cunningham: Before the Minister concludes, I would like him to return to provision for disabled children. I accept that there is additional money in the system that was promised, but provision simply is not ramping up to the extent needed. What more can the Minister do, beyond funding, to encourage providers to give us facilities for disabled children?

Mr Goodwill: Children with special needs certainly need special provision, and we are keen to ensure that we can continue to deliver that. As we move from the old statements to plans in mainstream education, it is proving an effective way to identify the children most in need. We must also consider how to help those in their early years as well.

Liz Twist: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: I am sure that the hon. Member for Colne Valley mentioned nurseries no longer being able to charge for lunches or additional hours. That is not the case. The early education strategy guidance is clear that providers can charge parents for meals and consumables, and for hours outside the free entitlement. Parents must not be required to pay any fee as a condition of taking up a free entitlement place. Many parents with a long working day need additional hours, and the system includes great flexibility.

Tracy Brabin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: I have very little time—three minutes—and I need to make a few points.

I am hearing fantastic individual stories showing the extraordinary impact that 30 hours childcare is having on families up and down the country. For example, a local employer in Staffordshire recently told us that parents who work at their factory no longer have to hand over their children in the car park as one parent clocks off and the other clocks on. Families like that are now enjoying family time together, rather than passing each other like ships in the night.

I will quickly cover one or two of the points made in the debate. The hon. Member for High Peak and the hon. Member for Colne Valley mentioned nurseries no longer being able to charge for lunches or additional hours. That is not the case. The early education strategy guidance is clear that providers can charge parents for meals and consumables, and for hours outside the free entitlement. Parents must not be required to pay any fee as a condition of taking up a free entitlement place. Many parents with a long working day need additional hours, and the system includes great flexibility.

Tracy Brabin: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he intend to cap those costs? Such charges will be what keep nurseries’ lights on and their staff employed. Will there be a two-tier system, and will he cap the costs?

Mr Goodwill: Nurseries are entitled to charge for additional hours and meals, nappies and other consumables, and they are free to charge what they wish, but a parent with a code can shop around and get a place that meets their exact requirements. As I said, 90% of the codes issued have now been taken up by providers. We are seeing many flexible arrangements: for example, a nursery and a childminder may work together to deliver provision.

I must conclude, but there are a number of other points that I would like to have made. I will write to the hon. Members to answer their specific points when I get the opportunity. I am proud of how the 30 hours childcare offer is transforming families’ lives. Parents up and down the country are enjoying more time with their children, more money in their pockets and less stress because the programme is cutting the cost of childcare. I hope that the hon. Member for High Peak has a few moments for a winding-up speech.

4.29 pm

Ruth George: I thank all my colleagues who have made such excellent speeches and good points. I simply ask the Minister to revisit the costings and meet providers to learn from them, especially those in outstanding settings employing graduate and fully qualified staff in order to provide the best-quality childcare.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 17 October 2017

[SIR ROGER GALE in the Chair]

Healthcare in Oxfordshire

9.30 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of healthcare in Oxfordshire.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. May I, at the outset, thank colleagues from both sides of the House for attending and the Minister for replying? I have deliberately left the wording of the motion quite open, because I want all colleagues to have the chance to set on the record any of their thoughts about the future of healthcare in Oxfordshire.

This is a multifaceted, complex topic. I will of course concentrate on west Oxfordshire and hope I will be forgiven for doing so. We all have particular concerns, and this topic perhaps matters to our constituents more than any other. I would like to broadly separate the debate into the following sections. I will review what was done within the first phase of the sustainability and transformation plan process, how it was handled, the split of the consultation into two phases, how the public were involved in the matter and the outcomes. I will then look forward to phase 2, the proposed changes that have been included and how the clinical commissioning group can work better with the public and all stakeholders throughout the process. I will explore ways in which we can move forward and give Members the chance to raise specific concerns from their constituencies. I will review the past, but for the sake of learning for the future.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Horton General Hospital is unique in that it serves not only Oxfordshire but Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and even Gloucestershire. I was very concerned about the lack of engagement by Oxfordshire CCG with relevant stakeholders in Warwickshire in phase 1 of its consultation. There was very little communication between the Oxfordshire and South Warwickshire CCGs, despite the fact that there is obviously a knock-on effect on Warwick Hospital. Why was there not greater communication? Colleagues have raised that repeatedly, but with few outcomes.

Robert Courts: That intervention precisely illustrates the point I will make in the course of this small speech about a lack of public consultation. That is most marked in the areas we will be talking about—in my case, Witney in west Oxfordshire, and in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), Banbury and the Horton. The point is that the issues surrounding the Horton go far further than Banbury; they relate to Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and the north of west Oxfordshire. The lack of engagement is perhaps the main theme of my speech, so I am grateful for that intervention.

I will start by talking about Deer Park surgery. I was elected just under a year ago today, when I faced an unfolding local press crisis. There was a lot of press attention and, understandably, an extremely distressing patient group centred around the closure of its much-loved practice, Deer Park medical centre. To give a short history, the practice was run by Virgin Care. The contract ended and was tendered, and Oxfordshire CCG health bosses received a bid from Virgin that, in their view, did not meet the requirements they were looking for, so they decided to close this small but very well-performing and popular surgery that provided an outstanding and much-needed service for Witney and its immediate surroundings.

The real kicker was that there was no real or meaningful consultation with the people of Witney before that took place. There was little discussion with the district or county councils as to how they may be able move things forward or help or to discuss the building that was coming down the line, nor with patient groups, who might have been able to suggest a way forward. The patients and elected representatives were simply told that it was happening. I met the CCG, Virgin and the patient groups many times, including here in Parliament, but the CCG was resolute: it had decided that the practice would close. Its view was that the lower level of service offered in the tender was not sufficient and that it could not justify spending that money on the surgery, even though the significant growth, to the tune of thousands of houses that we know Witney will have in the years to come, means that the need for the practice is not only present now but will remain so in the future.

The decision to close the practice led to legal action by a patient, funded by legal aid, to keep it open. After sustained campaigning by myself, the patient group and local councillors, the Oxfordshire joint health overview and scrutiny committee voted that making that change would not be a substantial change in service, nor with patient consultation making that change. While I hope I am not going beyond my remit in saying this—it clearly was.

The matter was referred to the Secretary of State for Health, who referred it to the Independent Reconfiguration Panel. That was the first time a primary care decision had been referred to that level—the highest possible level. Ultimately, the IRP ruled that the CCG did not have to reopen the practice, but it did provide specific strictures about the way the decision had been handled and about consultation. It specified that the CCG needed to improve the way that it engaged and further to consider Witney’s healthcare needs.

I hope everybody will forgive me if I quote a short chunk of the IRP report that is pertinent to my point:

“...The CCG should immediately commission a time limited project to develop a comprehensive plan for primary care and related services in Witney and its surrounds. At the heart of this must be the engagement of the public and patients in assessing current and future health needs, understanding what the options are for meeting their needs and co-producing the solutions. This work should seek to produce a strategic vision for future primary care provision in line with national and regional aims and should not preclude the possibility of providing services from the Deer Park Medical Centre in the future.”

It is quite clear from that report that the CCG requires a separate project to assess the primary care needs of Witney. Its immediate surrounding areas are included, but that wider reading should not include the
entirety of west Oxfordshire, which would enable the CCG to—as it seems to wish—simply wrap this piece of work into the wider STP work it is carrying out in any event.

The IRP is clear that the CCG is required to produce a specific, specially focused piece of work on Witney and its primary care needs. That is what the people of Witney should have. That should include a consideration of the impact upon projected housing growth in and around the town and a roadmap for primary care, covering what will be provided, by whom and at what place. Above all, the people of Witney should be presented with a range of options and scenarios, because if there is only one, there is no consultation. The CCG’s approach is a little bit like Henry Ford saying to the customer, “You can have whatever colour car you like, provided it’s a black one.”

I opened with that story and took some time over it because it is a microcosm of the problems that west Oxfordshire is facing with its CCG, and I suspect—we will hear from them in due course—that other Members in Oxfordshire feel the same. Oxfordshire has been facing a systemic issue with its CCG. The public have not been fully consulted and engaged in a dialogue about the overall picture of the future of healthcare in Oxfordshire any more than they were over the future of Deer Park medical centre.

The CCG is embarking on a consultation regarding primary care in Oxfordshire over the next month, and I am sure all colleagues will join me in engaging with that process, but there are lessons to be learned from Deer Park. I focus on it today because I want those lessons to be learned, and I am keen that we look at how we can avoid this happening again, rather than simply look back and dwell on the mistakes of the past.

Let me be quite clear: I am not a doctor. I do not presume to tell doctors, healthcare professionals or those who commission them how to do their job. I am one of those who feel that, by and large, the profession should be left in peace to do what they do best and to practise their job. However, I expect the people of Witney to be consulted at all times. I expect their voice to be heard and listened to, and for their needs to be met.

The impression should not be gained that I am against any change. I accept that healthcare professionals must allocate their resources in the most efficient way to ensure the best treatment for patients. I might not disagree with changes being made per se, if there was a clinical need, they worked well with other healthcare provision in the area and they were in the interests of the people of Witney and west Oxfordshire, including when we consider the challenges of the future, particularly in respect of housing. I might not be against what is suggested, but if there is to be change, the public and local stakeholders must be fully informed and involved in decision making at the earliest opportunity. The local community must not be surprised by changes being sprung on them. They must be aware of how any proposed changes will affect them and why those changes, in the CCG’s view, need to be made. If the changes are indeed for the better, the sensible, reasonable people of Witney and west Oxfordshire will support them, provided that they are properly explained.

I shall move on to the far wider issue of the STP process across west Oxfordshire. As I said, I do not necessarily disagree with decisions that are made from a clinical perspective. I might or might not agree with decisions, although let me be clear that I do disagree with some of the decisions that have been made. However, what always concerns me in every case is the way in which they are handled.

I have made my response to phase 1 of the STP publicly available—it is on my website—and it clearly outlines my concerns. I will not go through it all in detail now, but I will go through the headlines. The first is “Process”. I do not feel that the STP should ever have been split into two phases, and I made that abundantly clear to the CCG at the time. It is a simple headline point. How can we assess Oxfordshire’s healthcare needs when we hive off the decisions for the Horton, which have an impact on Chipping Norton, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire, and then say that there are some other decisions that are linked inextricably to the first section that we will look at at some future point—a date that keeps going further back into next year? The whole point of the STP process is to look at healthcare needs in the round, not piecemeal, with penny-packet decisions made earlier. Making that process impossible. As I have said, the CCG has a duty to the public to provide multiple viable solutions to enable true choice and real consultation.

I shall give an example of how local communities have not been involved. The projected ambulance times from the Horton or Chipping Norton to the John Radcliffe Hospital are simply improbable. Indeed, the journey times are wildly optimistic. There is an over-reliance on Google Maps. Anyone who lives locally in Chipping Norton or Banbury can tell us how long it actually takes to get from either of those towns to the John Radcliffe in traffic, because they do that journey all the time. There is a serious lack of indication of any involvement with South Central Ambulance Service, and they are the people who will be taking heavily pregnant mothers in the late stages of labour from north Oxfordshire or the north of west Oxfordshire to the John Radcliffe. The decision permanently to downgrade maternity services at the Horton, which was made by the CCG board in August, has been unanimously referred by the health overview and scrutiny committee to the Secretary of State, alongside the judicial review appeal that we know about. I go no further at this stage than to say that that indicates a seriously flawed decision-making process.

I make it clear at this stage that for those who live in the north of my constituency, around Chipping Norton, the downgrade of the Horton is greeted with utter dismay. It is important to understand why. Chipping Norton is rural. It is one of the highest places in Oxfordshire; it is one of the few places that still gets snow in winter—people do not get it anywhere else, but they do in Chipping Norton. A journey to Oxford takes, with traffic, the best part of an hour, or more if someone is in one of the outlying villages. I made it clear in the baby loss debate last week that I fear the consequences of an absence of proper obstetric services in the north of Oxfordshire, even more so if the Horton midwife-led unit does not have a standby ambulance. Those proposals are simply not safe, and the deeply moving baby loss debate reminded us last week, if we ever needed reminding, of the consequences of getting this wrong.
For the same reasons, the services at Chipping Norton hospital itself must be safeguarded. Chipping Norton is seeing significant development and needs its own NHS services, which are based in a new building alongside a superb GP medical centre. Perhaps the best example of the mess caused by the split consultation is the confusing reference to the possible closure of the Chipping Norton MLU in phase 1, which purports to deal only with the Horton. How on earth can we say, “We’ll have as a possible solution in phase 1 the possible closure of Chipping Norton; oh, but we won’t make any decisions about Chipping Norton until we come to phase 2”—which will be at some stage in the future—when that clearly impacts on the Horton? How can we decide what is right at the Horton unless we know what there will be at Chipping Norton? It is the same point again. We cannot decide on the future of Oxfordshire’s services unless we look at them as a whole. They ought not to be hived off piecemeal.

Let us look ahead to phase 2. I hope that it is clear from the points I have made that the consultation around phase 1 was inadequate. I stress again that I am not a doctor. If the decisions are in the interest of public safety, I of course appreciate their importance.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My constituents in Oxford West and Abingdon will be heartened by the hon. Gentleman’s speech so far. The points have been extremely well made and the nail has been hit on the head about the lack of proper engagement. As he probably knows, Abingdon Community Hospital is part of phase 2, and there is a real risk that beds will be removed from the hospital without the meaningful engagement about which he so eloquently speaks. Does he agree that the approach is not just flawed because it misses out that local knowledge, but erodes public trust in the democratic process?

**Robert Courts:** The hon. Lady foreshadows remarks that I will make in due course, because the issues that relate to Abingdon and Witney are linked. It is absolutely right to say that the approach erodes trust in the decision-making process and even in the democratic process. One has to have the support and understanding of the people in the communities that one is serving. That is just as true in Oxford West and Abingdon as it is in Witney and west Oxfordshire. I am very grateful for that intervention, which encapsulates precisely the point that I am making. I am interested to hear that the same things are occurring in Oxford West and Abingdon.

I stress yet again that I am not a doctor and am not seeking to tell healthcare professionals how to do their job, but as the hon. Lady’s intervention shows, all of us expect there to be proper engagement and the support of the public. I suggest that the past year and a half has been littered with mistakes and characterised by rushed and lazy consultation or no consultation at all. Now we are looking at phase 2, which is not just about the relatively isolated issue, however important, of the Horton and Chipping Norton, but about the entirety of Oxfordshire’s healthcare.

I understand that we are looking to go to full public consultation in summer 2018, with the final decisions to be made towards the end of 2018. At least, that is the case that the CCG makes; my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury may have comments about it in due course. We understand that the plan is to enhance certain regional community hospitals so that they can handle much more in house and become locality hubs, ensuring that fewer patients have to make the long journey along the A40 or the A34 to the John Radcliffe in the centre of Oxford. The aim is people being treated closer to home. That is, in itself, a laudable, sensible, clinically wise decision. It is an aim that we all have. No one wants to trek into Oxford if they can be treated in Witney, Abingdon or Chipping Norton. We are told that there will also be neighbourhood hubs, providing a centre for district nurses, general practitioners and physiotherapists.

The proposals already, at this early stage—we do not have the full proposals yet—suggest that although there is the promise of joined-up thinking and a structure for facilities, further points have not yet been fully considered. We have seen the re-emergence of some of the same issues that bedevilled Deer Park. I am talking about stroke beds at Witney Community Hospital. I hate to say it, but the CCG does not appear to have listened to the lessons that were learned in the first phase and with regard to Deer Park. We are seeing the same thing: specific issues are hived off from the wider STP process and forced through on their own, without consultation. The wider changes are meant to be considered in the round, looked at in conjunction with other facilities, with due regard to population growth. That is the whole point of an STP. We should not be seeing this balkanisation of the STP process so that within west Oxfordshire, decisions are taken outside the STP process and without the full consultation that is required.

For example, stroke beds, of which there are currently 10 each in Witney Community Hospital and Abingdon Community Hospital, will all be moved to Abingdon in November, which is only a few weeks away. The CCG’s case is that this will increase patient safety, as staff will not be spread across two sites. Again, I do not pretend to be a doctor, a healthcare professional or a clinical expert. There may be a case for that, but there are worrying signs already that it has not been thought through. For example, physiotherapy facilities have been tendered and awarded to Healthshare, which is moving into the former Deer Park medical centre in Witney. The flaw is that stroke patients needing rehab physio will now be 10 miles away in Abingdon, rather than those services being together. That also seems not to take account of the human aspects of rehabilitation: it is important to see friends and family.

**Layla Moran:** The problem in Abingdon is that people are concerned that the physiotherapy unit has been moved away. That point about access is incredibly important, especially in our area, where we frankly cannot get anywhere for the traffic.

**Robert Courts:** I am grateful for that intervention, which is the mirror image of the point that I am making about Witney. The hon. Lady and I face exactly the same problem, but from other ends of the same road. We have the A40, the A34 and the roads inside and around Oxford. Whichever direction a patient is going in it is not a happy prospect for them, whether they originate in west Oxfordshire or in Oxford West and Abingdon.

Again, my point is that this has not been consulted on in any meaningful sense. It has been sprung upon the public when everybody understood, until now, that the
future of the wider services would be considered in the round as part of phase 2 of the STP. Suddenly, these proposals were made public at the county council’s joint health overview and scrutiny committee meeting in September, only a matter of weeks ago.

The devil lies in the detail, as always. When we consider what we do not yet know, it becomes clear why it is so important to have a consultation. I would like to see, for example, a map showing where stroke patients come from—where the preponderance of those treated at Witney or Abingdon happen to be, so that we know where they can best be treated. That is not something the public have seen. We should know whether the Witney catchment area includes just the town, or whether it includes west Oxfordshire or Chipping Norton to the north of it. What will the interplay be between Witney hospital and the physiotherapy that is to be just down the road at Deer Park? What hours of care are being delivered now, and what is proposed for the future?

There may or may not be force to those points. We simply do not know. Once again, without a comparison of the status quo and the proposed changes, it is impossible to see whether what is being proposed is a downgrade to, and a reduction in, the services provided. That is the whole point of scrutiny. That is the whole point of consultation. That is not what we are seeing in Witney and west Oxfordshire at present. All this comes just a couple of months before the changes are due to come into effect, with no consultation in any meaningful sense, over a very compacted time period. It simply is not good enough for the people of Witney and west Oxfordshire.

The public can hardly be blamed if they wonder what the future of their hospital in Witney is, whether a ward is going to close or whether the hospital itself is in danger of closing—whether this is the beginning of a death by a thousand cuts, where the hospital is downgraded to the point at which it becomes unviable. They need to be reassured loudly and clearly by the CCG that no beds are closing. They need to be reassured that the loss of a specialism is not the beginning of a death by a thousand cuts, where the hospital is downgraded to the point at which it becomes unviable. They need to be reassured that a new specialism for the beds will be proposed, so that Witney hospital can look forward to a bright future in which it receives more services through phase 2, perhaps becoming a locality hub, building on the excellent, innovative emergency multidisciplinary unit that is already in place.

Of course, the CCG’s response will be that that work has not yet been done, but that just is not good enough. Why are we hearing the proposals now if some of the work that is still to be done lies a year in the future? At best, this is a situation that could result in exemplary healthcare services, structured to face the pressures on healthcare of a modern town, and the public are only seeing the negatives. At worst, something is being hidden. We need clarity. This is not about cuts or a lack of funding. This is about a failure to communicate with the public about what is happening to their treasured services. The future of Witney Community Hospital is paramount, and I look forward to the CCG making a statement that makes its bold and bright future clear very soon.
one of the best. I have been outside the STP process because my area was handled separately in advance. Townlands Hospital in Henley needed a multi-million pound investment before the STP process started, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) that the process of consultation that was started by the CCG left a lot to be desired. As a former professional in the area of consultation, I looked with some disdain at what was taking place, but I appreciate that the CCG had a particular difficulty in seeing the hospital as Henley’s or south Oxfordshire’s, which they deliberately intended it to become. In the villages outside Henley that make up the largest proportion of people in south Oxfordshire, there was enormous support for the proposals. It was only in Henley that people took the opportunity to complain about the lack of beds.

Let me turn to the lack of beds. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney spoke about treating people in hospitals close to them. I fully agree with that, but a better model would be to treat them in their own homes. That healthcare system is called ambulatory care. I have spoken about that in this Chamber at length, so I will not repeat all of what I have said before. Ambulatory care requires a full integration of social care activities and medical activities in an area, because it turns the hospital into an extremely efficient medical campus-type facility, with very few people needing to stay in overnight.

In fact, if people stay in overnight, the effects on them are quite horrendous. Anyone over the age of 60 who stays in for four or five days is immediately incontinent. Without wishing to comment on people’s ages, some of us in the Chamber would look at that with great horror. If people stay in for a lot longer than that, other bad effects come from that.

When the consultation took place, there was a tremendous amount of antagonism about the beds being put—

**The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne):** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**John Howell:** Of course.

**Mr Dunne:** I am sure that my hon. Friend, who is making a powerful, constructive contribution to the debate, would not want to give colleagues the impression that of necessity, someone over the age of 60 would become incontinent if they spent four nights in a hospital. I think he is trying to suggest that there is a greater risk of adverse effects the longer one stays in hospital.

**John Howell:** I thank the Minister for that point; I was not suggesting that it was an inevitability. However, at this stage let me extend an invitation to him to visit the hospital so he can see how it works and how it has integrated social care with the medical activities there. It is based around a RACU—a rapid access care unit—which is similar to the EMU—emergency multidisciplinary unit—in Abingdon that is being proposed elsewhere. As I said, it turns the hospital into a diagnostics hospital, similar to a hospital developed in Welwyn Garden City that I went to see.

I saw the difficulty for the CCG with regard to its consultation when I went to a SELF—a South East Locality Forum—meeting. People from Henley were sitting around the table with big beaming smiles on their faces saying how wonderful the hospital was, and a member of the CCG had to stop them and say, “Well, it is a pity you didn’t say that when we were developing the hospital. Right to the end of the consultation you were attacking us on this and on taking the beds out and putting them in a care home at the side of the hospital. That is working very well and now you say that it is absolutely wonderful.” The fact is that, apart from some minor snags with the new hospital, it is a fantastic new investment by the Department of Health. It shows the way a community hospital should be developed not just in Oxfordshire but across the country. I repeat my invitation to the Minister to come and visit.

The great thing about the hospital was not the consultation initiated by the CCG but the support that I got from the Royal College of Physicians, which came out very strongly in favour of an ambulatory healthcare model and very favourably in support of the hospital. That is an interesting point, which goes back to my comments in support of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney about the lack of consultation experience on the part of the CCG. That organisation is willing to learn, and I hope that it will. I also hope that we, as MPs who meet it from time to time, will be able to keep up our pressure on it to deliver the sort of services that we feel our constituents want.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** On the point about learning, the Oxfordshire clinical commissioning group has only one district council from Warwickshire—Stratford-on-Avon District Council—on its board. In phase 1 of the consultation, which began in January, it only met the council in March; the council’s overview and scrutiny committee had requested a much earlier meeting. Should that not be part of the learning process?

**John Howell:** I fully agree that it should be. As I said, I am not here to defend how the CCG does its consultation. If I had the chance, I would make many changes to the consultation, and including others on the list of people who will be consulted as part of the decision-making process would be an important part of that.

I think I have probably said enough both to support my hon. Friend the Member for Witney and to make the point that it is possible to get through even a bad consultation by a CCG and get a fantastic hospital—ours is doing a brilliant job for all the constituents of south Oxfordshire, not just for one town.

10.7 am

**Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this important debate. He spoke with verve and passion; in fact, throughout his speech I was grateful that I was never prosecuted by him when he was at the Bar, because I would not have stood a chance. He made his points cogently and those were ably supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). I, too, am a trade envoy—I missed a trick in not informing you of that before the debate, Sir Roger—but I wish my hon. Friend luck with his forthcoming meeting, and I quite understand why he cannot stay for the entire debate.
Let me speak briefly, because I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) also wants to speak and she is particularly passionate about this subject. I fully support the comments that my hon. Friend the Member for Witney made about the consultation process, which has been, not to put too fine a point on it, pretty tortuous. That has not been helped by the fact that the chief executive and the chairman of the clinical commissioning group both left in the summer, although this gives me an opportunity to congratulate the new chairman, Kiren Collison, who has just been elected on a 97% turnout of GPs in Oxfordshire.

There is clearly great passion for health services in our county—an affluent county that is capable of providing very good services to the people here. But we are getting older, and over the next few years, the population of people aged over 85 will rise by almost 100% and the population of those aged over 60 will increase by 58,000. We are also getting more houses, which are much needed, but that also means that the population as a whole will rise from its current 700,000 to almost 900,000 in the next decade or so. There are great pressures on our local health service, and it has not been helped by this consultation period.

Let me highlight three issues in my constituency, starting with Wantage Community Hospital, a much loved local amenity, which previously had maternity services, with about 60 births a year. I regularly bump into people in Wantage who were born there—many of my constituents were. The hospital was closed in April 2016 because legionella kept being found in the pipe system. Some 4,000 people signed a petition asking simply for the physiotherapy and maternity services to remain open. As I said, there is huge support and there have been great demonstrations in favour of it.

The process that has followed has been appalling. The consultation was due to start in October 2016, but as my hon. Friend knows, the clinical commissioning group split the consultation into two phases, with the first covering acute hospitals and the second covering community hospitals. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury might comment on that strange way of going about a consultation. In any event, the first consultation did not take place until January 2017, three months late.

As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Mr Edward Vaizey) has pointed out, community hospitals are not covered in that phase.

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In addition, we have now lost our physiotherapy services. They were tendered, and Healthshare won the tender, but it informed my local newspaper that it would not provide physiotherapy services in Wantage as it otherwise would have done, because it was not offered the opportunity. The only service that the hospital can offer is limited maternity care; it has effectively been closed for more than a year, and will have been closed for two years when we get to the phase 2 consultation that might decide its future. That is a completely unacceptable position. I have said again and again to my constituents that I will support anything that provides good healthcare services in Wantage, whether in the community hospital or elsewhere, but at the very least I would like the consultation to start so that my constituents can participate in the discussion.
I was seven. I apologise that many people in this Chamber will have heard it before, but I do not know that you have had that pleasure, so with your permission, I will carry on.

Let us remember what we are talking about. The Horton is not a community hospital. It has been a pleasure to listen to colleagues talk about their community hospitals; we have heard about Wantage and Abingdon, and one rarely meets my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) without hearing him mention the Townlands, of which he is very proud. I love community hospitals too; my mother helped run Brackley Cottage Hospital for most of my childhood and until recently, and I think that the marvellous hospital in Bicester still has untapped potential. However, the Horton General Hospital, which I will talk about, is quite different.

The Horton has hundreds of beds and treats about 39,000 people in accident and emergency every year—nearly one third of Oxfordshire’s A&E attendances. What happens at the Horton affects all my colleagues, due to the knock-on effects of closure. Our surgeons are among the top five in the UK for neck and femur operations. It is not a community hospital; it is a fully functioning, very busy district general.

We feel beleaguered. For more than 40 years, the John Radcliffe Hospital has viewed us as a smaller and less academic sibling that can be treated with contempt when staffing is short. In 2008—this is not ancient history; it is nine years ago—the Independent Reconfiguration Panel was asked to consider the last proposed downgrade of paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology and the special care baby unit. It conducted, as I hope it will again, a full five-month review and made five excellent recommendations, which I will read once more.

The first recommendation was:
“the IRP considers that the Horton Hospital has an important role for the future in providing local hospital-based care to people in the north of Oxfordshire and surrounding areas. However, it will need to change to ensure its services remain appropriate, safe and sustainable.”

On the proposed downgrades, it said:
“The IRP does not consider that they will provide an accessible or improved service to the people of north Oxfordshire and surrounding areas.”

Other recommendations were:
“The PCT should carry out further work with the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust to set out the arrangements and investment necessary to retain and develop services at the Horton Hospital. Patients, the public and other stakeholders should be fully involved in this work... The PCT must develop a clear vision for children’s and maternity services within an explicit strategy for services for north Oxfordshire as a whole... The ORH must do more to develop clinically integrated practice across the Horton, John Radcliffe and Churchill sites as well as developing wider clinical networks with other hospitals, primary care and the independent sector.”

I am afraid that none of that happened. The recommendations were made nine years ago, but none of them were followed. The only things that changed were that the traffic got worse and the population of the area grew. Our district council, I am proud to say, tops the leader board for house building.

Less than 10 years later, we now have no obstetrics or SCBU. They went in the blink of an eye, without any real attempt to address recruitment issues or work with us to do so, although we offered and offered. Locally, we remain deeply unhappy and frightened. Patients in the later stages of labour are travelling for up to two hours, and emergency gynaecological operations take place in a portakabin in the Radcliffe car park. We have heard stories locally—in fact, they are all people talk about—of babies born in lay-bys and in the back of ambulances. The data that show statistics of complete births—defined by when the placenta has been delivered—tell a different story; they do not register the reality of people’s experience.

I pay tribute to what my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) said about Google Maps. Locally, the impression is that the CCG and the trust massage the figures and use them when it suits their argument. I conducted a travel survey of nearly 400 people on their real-life experiences of how long it takes to get from our area to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. Sadly, those data were not taken on board in any of the CCG’s reports, although the data set was bigger and better than the CCG’s. The CCG provided real data only when we had harangued, pestered and begged it to do so.

I will not go on about how worried I am; I will focus on what we can do to put the situation right. It is true, as all hon. Members have said, that local health providers do not talk to one another. Health Education England’s decision to remove training accreditation for middle-grade obstetricians was the straw that broke the camel’s back for recruitment, yet it remains aloof and makes decisions in a vacuum. Its recent decision to remove accreditation from certain grades of anaesthetists puts all the acute services provided by the Horton at risk. The dean did not communicate that decision to decision makers at the trust or the CCG; I had to tell them at a meeting in August. I do not think that that is an acceptable way to run a healthcare system.

The trust usually tells the CCG what to do. When it does not agree, there is stalemate. The trust, the clinicians and everyone else locally know that the A&E at the Horton cannot possibly be shut, because the knock-on effects on the rest of Oxfordshire and the surrounding counties would be catastrophic. The CCG, however, is determined to press ahead with its consultation that suggests otherwise. Owing to this impasse, we have ended up with a split consultation that means nothing to any of us. Patients’ needs appear to be an afterthought. South Central Ambulance Service, which bears the brunt of the transfers, is carried along as a consultee with no voice at the table when decisions are taken.

One of the main complaints is that local health decision makers do not listen to us. Our latest consultation report described the “universal concerns” of more than 10,000 people from my area who responded to our consultation. I cannot overemphasise the strength of local feeling. We all feel the same: all the elected representatives, of whatever party; a great campaigning group, Keep the Horton General; and even the local churches, which are praying for sense in the clinical commissioning group’s decision making. [Interruption.] My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) laughs, but I am afraid it is impossible to overstate how essential our local hospital is to people in our area. He may think it is funny, but we do not.

Mr Vaizey: For the record, I am laughing because I have never heard of a church praying for sense from a clinical commissioning group. That highlights the parlous state that we find ourselves in.
Victoria Prentis: Quite.

At our last meeting, the trust’s chief executive told me that my fears about the Horton were “irrational”, but those fears are shared by the IRP—at least they were nine years ago, and I hope they still are—and by about 170,000 people who are served by the Horton. Rather than try to answer my questions, the chief executive simply dismissed them. I do not think that that is an acceptable way to behave.

We still do not know whether a father can transfer with a labouring mother from the midwife-led unit at the Horton. If not, how on earth is he supposed to get to north Oxford while she gives birth? We still do not know—although I have asked more often than I care to remember—whether the static ambulance will be stationed permanently at the Horton while all this is sorted out. As we have heard from all hon. Members. The CCG and the trust do not communicate with us elected representatives permanently at the Horton while all this is sorted out. We simply dismissed them. I do not think that that is an acceptable way to behave.

Rather than try to answer my questions, the chief executive instead dismissed them. I do not think that that is an acceptable way to behave.

If help with recruitment is the answer, we need the Department to step in. Salary supplements for trainee GPs are really welcome, not just for rural or coastal areas but for market towns that face unprecedented growth. The catchment is predicted to increase from 170,000 to 207,000. We really need obstetricians. The district council has made sensible suggestions for developing and improving the Horton site; I just wish the CCG and the trust would look at them. They were included in the response to the consultation—I also made a very extensive response—but when I mentioned them at the last meeting in August, none of this had registered with the decision makers. I do wonder about the depth and quality of the work they do.

I know that the Horton has a future as a provider of acute services. I am sorry to use the language of war, but I welcome the sight of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney defending my right flank, as he so often does. Ever since he was elected, he has been a real ally and friend in this fight. We in Banbury are most grateful to him for all his work and for securing this debate. I also welcome the support of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), who are both in Cabinet this morning but will be interested in this debate. They both feel as we do about our hospital in Banbury. My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) was present earlier; his district council has been a great ally, has brought one of the judicial reviews, and continues to support us—even though, as far as I can tell, it is not consulted about anything by the Oxfordshire CCG. I really feel that we are beleaguered, so it is lovely to see hon. Members appearing like battalions, with patients and GPs in their wake, to support all of us who use the Horton General Hospital.

We are not irrational, but we are passionate. We want a reasoned and evidence-based conversation about the future. We are very, very determined, so I am afraid everyone in this Chamber will have to listen to this speech many, many more times.

10.29 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for securing a debate on this important subject. It gives us an opportunity to discuss a subject that I would suggest goes beyond Oxfordshire.

Forgive me if I am not as familiar with the healthcare scene in Oxfordshire as many of the hon. Members who have spoken today, but I have listened closely and what they have described resonates with similar situations across the country. I applaud their commitment and dedication on behalf of their constituents, which, by the sound of things, are quite justifiable. It is clear from what hon. Members have said that the people of Oxfordshire seem to be very unhappy about the proposals, and my research shows me that perhaps they have good reason to be.

The proposed changes will mean less hospital beds; changes to acute stroke services; changes to care at the Horton General Hospital, as the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) has just explained to us in great detail; changes to critical care; changes to maternity services; and changes to the special baby care services. I gather that there has been lots of vociferous opposition to these proposals on the ground, which has been reflected in hon. Members’ comments today. I understand that local people have said in a petition that they believe these proposed changes will lead to poor services, a
cheaper service, overcrowding and long waits. I particularly noted what a local A&E doctor said about the process way back in August:

“This is just awful. Working in A&E is particularly difficult, and has been all year. We often have significant nursing and medical rota gaps, and long waiting times. Despite it being August, every shift has patients on trolleys in the corridor, with the time waiting for a bed over 12 hours...We are not coping”.

I also note that there is a proposal to reduce the number of hospital beds in the first instance by 110 further beds. Clearly, no one is listening to the NHS staff there in Oxfordshire.

Oxford City Council has also expressed its concerns and has quite rightly commented on the lack of a workforce plan. Interestingly, however, it also said that it understands the position that the clinical commissioning group finds itself in. We have heard a lot of criticisms of the CCG this morning and it has obviously been remiss in its consultation process. However, the council says it understands that the CCG is up against national policy.

That point is very important, because what we have heard this morning is not only a problem that affects Oxfordshire. The hon. Member for Witney spoke about his constituency being one of the few that still has snow. My constituency, too, still has snow—lots of it—and we also have in common a great dissatisfaction with the health services that we are receiving, particularly as we look forward, or maybe dread, the introduction of the sustainability and transformation plans.

At this stage, we have a national health service, and the changes that we have heard about this morning are Oxfordshire’s response as part of the STP group that takes into account Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and west Berkshire. The STP ordered by Government is one of the 44 they have ordered. In total, those STPs will look to save the NHS £22 billion and the share of the savings that have to be made by Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and west Berkshire is £480 million. That, I would suggest, is at the root of the changes.

Victoria Prentis: I accept that I could not possibly expect the hon. Lady, coming from Burnley as she does, to have the encyclopaedic knowledge of Oxfordshire health services that, sadly, we Oxfordshire MPs have to, but the changes to the Horton General Hospital apparently stem from recruitment—the inability to recruit obstetricians—and not a lack of money. Indeed, the changes started when the STP was just a twinkle in someone’s eye, so the situation is slightly more nuanced.

Julie Cooper: I note the hon. Lady’s points, and there is another issue we could talk about. Our NHS has a crisis on three fronts—a funding crisis, a workforce crisis and a systemic crisis—and I think that is what we are looking at today: some of the systemic problems.

Going forward, £480 million has to be saved. This is not something that the CCG has decided to do, and it shows how transparent the consultation is—it sounds like it needs to up its game on that—because it still has to make its share of that saving.

As for the national health service, I note with absolute horror that, when it comes to the percentage of GDP that we spend on our NHS, we are well down the league—indeed, we are close to the bottom—compared with nations that we would expect to be up there with. We are behind France, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, New Zealand, Portugal and Japan—I do not have time to list them all, but we are well down the list.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) quite rightly mentioned the issue of beds and how it is not really a bad issue—people ought to receive care at home where possible. I totally support that; the problem is that the cart is being put before the horse. The care, including social care, is not there in the first instance to allow us to reduce hospital beds and provide the excellent care in the community that we all want to see. When it comes to the number of hospital beds per head of population, we are again close to the bottom of the league.

For obvious reasons, healthcare in the modern NHS is delivered in a different way. In all comparable nations, the number of hospital beds has reduced, but nowhere near to the extent that it has been reduced in England. I particularly note with horror the reduction in maternity beds and mental health beds. There has been a lot of talk about standing up for the mentally ill, but beds in mental health care have actually been reduced by over 90%. That is very worrying when we all see that the necessary care is not there in the community. In fact, Oxfordshire County Council has said it is worried that there would be no impact assessment of some of the proposed changes. How was the community going to cope? Were the services in place in the community to provide support when, for example, hospital beds were removed? The council was not convinced that that was the case.

So, we are bottom of the league on spending as a percentage of GDP and close to the bottom—we are just bumping along the bottom—on hospital beds.

Robert Courts: I understand that the hon. Lady has her job to do, but I am quite keen that this debate, which is about a much more complicated local healthcare issue, is not reduced to one in which—if she will forgive me for saying so—some rather crude political points are made. For what they are worth, the statistics are that the NHS Oxfordshire CCG has received a funding increase of 2% in 2017-18 compared with the previous financial year, and another 2% increase is forecast for the following financial year, so more money is going into the CCG. What is clear—the CCG was quite open about this in the phase 1 consultations instigated and organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and I—is that the issue is not funding. It is about transparency of consultation and organisation, so I would be grateful if the hon. Lady did not reduce this debate to a political or money issue.

Julie Cooper: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am sorry that he thinks I am reducing the debate; actually, I am looking at the national health service—we do still have a national health service, and I am thankful that we do. I take the points that he has made. These local reconfigurations of healthcare services are very complex; I understand that. However, underpinning all this—it is well documented—is that the STP for the region must make a saving of £480 million. That will be the funding gap if things continue as they are. The changes are not being made for patient gain, and that is why right hon. and hon. Members are rightly upset. They listen to their constituents, and their constituents,
as they begin to see the changes coming forward, know they are definitely not an improvement. There is a financial motivation behind them.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Witney for introducing the debate. It is really important. I sympathise with the people of Oxfordshire, as I do with people across the country in the 44 different STP groups—we are hearing the same story in each of them. I hope that the Minister will address the points raised and that he will encourage clinical commissioning groups to consult more widely, thoroughly and transparently and will equip them with the tools they need. In case anyone does not believe me, did anyone really think that Simon Stevens, head of NHS England, was lying when he said that the NHS did not have enough funding? When the chair of the Care Quality Commission said that social care was close to its tipping point—that has a bearing on this matter—did anyone think he was lying? Of course not. These are very important issues, and I hope that the Minister is listening, because this is part of a Government’s national plan for our health service.

10.41 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing the debate and on the manner in which he spoke. I share the admiration of my right hon. Friend. The Minister for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) of the forensic skills he has brought here from a former life, and I feel somewhat fortunate that I am sitting on the same side of the Chamber as he is.

We have heard many powerful contributions about the strength of feeling in Oxfordshire from its many impressive elected representatives, and about how a large number of the service changes that are under consideration in the county have suffered from a lack of engagement, with the clinical commissioning group in particular failing to explain to local residents the purpose of and the objectives behind the changes. I take that on board, as something that needs to improve, and I will come back to it at the end of my remarks.

It is very clear, from the Government and the Department of Health, through the NHS leadership, that all proposed service changes should be based on clear evidence that they will deliver better outcomes for patients. That is at the heart of why service change is proposed. We have made an explicit commitment to the public that all proposed service changes should meet four tests. Just to rehearse them, they are that they should have support from GP commissioners, be based on clinical evidence, consider patient choice and, most specifically for the purposes of this debate, demonstrate public and patient engagement. In the case of the service change proposals that have been made thus far in Oxfordshire, when they are capable of coming to us for determination, for ministerial decision making on appeal, my colleague the Secretary of State and I are placed in some difficulty, because we need to remain impartial and consider the issues on their merits. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Witney and other colleagues will therefore appreciate that I am unable to offer opinions on the merits of the proposals from the two transformation consultations, whether actual or anticipated.

We recognise that Oxfordshire, like many areas across England, faces unprecedented demand for its services. We are all aware of the growing number of older people, many of whom are living with more complex chronic conditions, partially thanks to the success of the NHS in keeping people going for longer, but we have also heard from a number of colleagues that Oxfordshire faces particular population pressures, with welcome increases in house building planned for the coming decades. In addition, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) said when she intervened on the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), there are particular challenges in recruiting high-quality NHS staff into many of our facilities, not just in rural and coastal areas but across the country. We accept that, and are looking to increase the numbers of medical and nursing staff being trained. There was an unprecedented 25% increase in doctors in training, announced last year by the Secretary of State, and earlier this month a record increase of 25% in the number of nurses in training was announced for the next two years. Those are all reasons why the Oxfordshire transformation programme has been reviewing the model of care to ensure that future health service provision in the county is clinically and financially sustainable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney began his remarks by referring to the closure of the Deer Park medical practice in Witney. I will not go into the full history, but he acknowledged that the closure took place in March this year. In the previous December, a judicial review had been requested and, as my hon. Friend pointed out, this was the first time in recent years that such a thing had happened to a primary care facility. The judge who heard the case refused permission to bring it for judicial review, and it was therefore passed to the independent review panel in March of this year. The panel concluded that the referral was not suitable for full review because further local action could address the issues raised.

The Secretary of State considered and accepted the recommendations—some of which my hon. Friend the Member for Witney read out—and the Oxfordshire CCG is now working to address them. Foremost among the recommendations was that all former patients of Deer Park medical practice should be registered at an alternative practice as soon as possible. My understanding is that, of the 4,400 patients who were registered with the practice, more than 4,000 had been reregistered, as of mid-September, and that the CCG is acting to encourage the remaining 400 patients to register at one of the three other GP practices in and around Witney, whose lists remain open so that patients can register at a practice of their choice, as long as they live within its catchment area. I believe that a further letter will be sent out to all those remaining patients, to encourage them to register with another GP.

The second key recommendation, which my hon. Friend the Member for Witney also referred to, was that a primary care framework be developed to provide direction for a sustainable GP service in Witney and the surrounding area. That is at the crux of his concern about the way in which the CCG engages. I happen to have a copy of its locality map for primary care, and I note that the consultation on how primary care services should be developed for west Oxfordshire opened last week. I strongly encourage my hon. Friend...
to engage with the CCG and to encourage his residents to do so, so that it learns from the lessons of the Deer Park lack of consultation and, in devising services for the future, fully takes into account local residents' concerns. I believe that the consultation period is six weeks and is due to conclude at the end of November. A common theme in colleagues' contributions today has been that lack of engagement, as they see it, with the local CCG.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury raised again today her historic championing of the cause of Horton General, which clearly goes beyond primary care into secondary care. She gave us another history lesson. She has been campaigning on this issue since she was seven years old, and I think she could probably trump any Member who wanted to stand up and say that they had been consistently campaigning on any issue since a young age. Having said that, I suspect that one or two older Members have been campaigning on the same issues for longer, but certainly not from such a young age.

My hon. Friend referred to the temporary suspension last October of the obstetric-led service in the Horton because of the difficulties in recruiting doctors and midwives. It has temporarily become a midwife-led unit. As she also pointed out, at a public board meeting this August, the CCG accepted recommendations following consultation. [ Interruption. ] She may regard that as inadequate, but there has been some consultation. Those recommendations include one to centralise Oxfordshire's obstetric facilities in the John Radcliffe Hospital and one to make the midwife-led unit at Horton General a permanent establishment. As she has pointed out, that decision is subject to judicial review and referral to the Secretary of State, so no action will be taken to make that recommendation permanent until the referral process has run its course.

My hon. Friend has referred to a number of the challenges posed for local residents and for pregnant women in labour in getting access to Horton General. I have taken note of the comments made by her and other Members on the reliance on Google Maps to determine travel times. I understand that the CCG has undertaken an extensive travel survey. If a mother is in labour and is in an ambulance, she has the benefit of the blue light service to get through the traffic. That can mean a more rapid journey time than ordinary residents would expect or experience.

Victoria Prentis: I am so grateful to the Minister for giving way and for the comments he is making. Most people who go to hospital while in the later stages of labour to have a baby are not in an ambulance. The ambulance times relate only to transfers from the midwife-led unit to the Radcliffe. Although a significant number of the people who give birth in the MLU have to transfer during or immediately after labour—we are told that it is up to 40%—that is nothing compared with the vast majority of women, who travel in a private car, if they are lucky enough to have one.

Mr Dunne: Indeed, I recognise that. If we are moving to an obstetric-led service at the John Radcliffe, any mother who is high-risk or expected to give birth will have time to travel in good order, rather than in an emergency. I accept that emergency transfers do take place from midwife-led units during the course of labour.

I have heard the criticism about the overall transformation programme for Oxfordshire being divided into two phases. At this point, we are where we are. The first phase has come to a conclusion, and we are entering the second phase. I recognise some of the criticisms that it is hard to comprehend a coherent system without seeing it all laid out together.

Mr Vaizey: I hate to interrupt the Minister’s flow as he is getting stuck into the STP, but as time is running out, will he prevail on his officials to write to me after this debate and answer two questions? First, when will the next tranche of capital funding be available for GP surgeries in Oxfordshire? Secondly, what engagements could his Department facilitate between Assura, myself and the clinical commissioning group to try to break the logjam at the Wantage surgery? I do not want to waste any more of his time, and I feel reluctant to prevail upon his officials’ time, but that would be very helpful.

Mr Dunne: I can do better than that; I can answer my right hon. Friend’s first question directly. The bids for STP capital funding have been made by all 44 STP areas. They are being assessed at the moment, and we will be making submissions to the Chancellor for the Budget to see whether there will be a capital release for phase 2 of STPs. It is a competitive process. I can confirm that the STP area covering Oxfordshire has made a bid, but I cannot confirm whether it will be successful, because we will not know until we know how much the Chancellor is prepared to release in the Budget. I will happily write to him on his second question and his concerns about Wantage.

Members have said much about some of their concerns about their community hospitals. In his absence, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for his invitation to visit his hospital and look at the rapid access care unit. I am pleased that he supports the second phase of the Oxfordshire transformation programme is continuing. As has been pointed out in the debate, the CCG leadership is going through a transition period. We have a process under way to recruit a new chief executive, who is expected to be in post in the coming weeks. I am sure that the chairman will read this debate and take note of the comments that have been made on the challenges in engaging in recent years, as will the new clinical lead, who was appointed only yesterday. It is important that Oxfordshire CCG undertakes full public engagement for the second phase of the transformation, and I am aware that that is what it is intending to do. It is likely to begin early in the new year, and I strongly encourage all Members to engage with that consultation in as forceful and impressive a way as they have with this debate, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney. I pay tribute to the passion with which everyone has spoken about their commitment to their local residents in providing high-quality healthcare in Oxfordshire.
Robert Courts: I thank every Member who has contributed with such passion, in such detail and in such a thoughtful way to a debate that is of overriding importance to all our residents in all our constituencies.

In particular, I thank those Members who have brought extra elements into the debate. I am now under time pressure, but I am grateful to Members for listening to me when I spoke in some detail on some things. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned ambulatory care; as we all know, treatment close to or at home is ideal. He also told us about his community hospital of which he is so proud. It sounds very much as if it is the way in which things should be done.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) mentioned the population growth of 700,000 to 900,000, which illustrates the challenge we face in Oxfordshire. I also thank him for mentioning the pressure on GP services, including on a number of the surgeries in his constituency. Through pressure of time, I have not been able to mention all those in my constituency, but I am well aware of the pressures on primary care, which go wider than Deer Park. Other hon. Members will feel the same.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the lack of an imaginative approach to the use of buildings, which is absolutely right. That is what I asked the CCG to do and that is really why I was talking about engagement with the local community and with patient groups; they are the ones who have those imaginative ideas.

We all bow down before the passion and knowledge of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). She is a formidable voice in fighting for her constituents at the Horton and more widely. She quoted the IRP recommendation from nine years ago, and it is extraordinary how that almost directly foreshadows the remarks I made. As she said, patients must be fully involved.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) for attending. She is in the Opposition and so has a political job to do, but I slightly regret her tone, because the issue is not political. She does not realise that locally this has been a cross-party issue. I am grateful to people from other parties in Witney—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury feels the same—where we have been fighting for the common good.

The Minister gave us some statistics, but there are many others. I alluded to the increase in funding received by the CCG, and I thank the Government for the fact that we have record investment in the NHS, record numbers of doctors and nurses in training, and record investment in mental health in particular. Let us not lose sight of that. The issue is clear and it is not about funding—I echo that now.

I thank the Minister for his understanding. I understand the limits of what he can say. Service charges must be based on clear evidence—that is absolutely right. I shall of course engage with the primary care location plan. Oxfordshire is a wonderful place to live and if we all work together with the CCG we will secure the future of Oxfordshire's healthcare.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Lowland Curlew

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered lowland curlew.

It is a pleasure to talk about the natural environment under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, as you have spoken out forcefully for animal welfare and the natural environment during your time in Parliament. One of the great things about this forum is that it allows Members of this House to indulge their passions. I am proud to call myself a passionate bird lover.

I applied for this debate in the context of a crisis of species decline across these islands. For me, the curlew is special. It is one of our largest waders, with a beautiful, haunting call, but this species of bird is in serious trouble across large parts of Britain. Across many counties, species of birds, mammals, invertebrates and plants are going extinct. The curlew is already extinct in my county of Berkshire, and it is estimated that there are just 300 pairs of breeding curlew left south of Birmingham. At the current rate of loss, they will disappear from southern England in the next eight years. Like the nightingale and corncrake, these once-common and much-loved birds are silently vanishing. The reason is simple: curlew chicks are being killed by predators. In one study site in Shropshire, 63 eggs in 19 curlew nests were monitored by volunteers, and not one chick fledged. The majority were predated by foxes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who has just left the Chamber, is extremely proud of the volunteer operation to protect curlew in Shropshire and is desperate to know more about what can be done to protect the remaining curlew in his county. Sadly, those facts about predation are not unique to Shropshire. Sites in Hampshire and Devon reported 100% nest failure last year. Those dire results prompted me to request this debate about the failure of existing conservation approaches to face tough decisions.

We need to recognise that this species is slipping away because our national approach to conserving species does not work well enough. Ten years ago, the Environmental Audit Committee identified that a new approach was required to address the dramatic biodiversity loss that is occurring in England, but that never happened. I thought that I was helping it to happen with “Biodiversity 2020”, which was published under my watch at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2011, but it was not enough.

Over the past decade or more, politicians and large conservation organisations have become locked in a doomed pact. Both want to achieve change through legislation and increasing regulation. The logic is simple enough, and it suits both sides: they can both take the credit for acting without ever having to undertake a day’s conservation themselves. Should that approach fail, they can demand a further increase in regulation and take more credit. The problem, as the curlew illustrates, is that it does not work. The music has stopped, and as last year’s “State of Nature” report highlighted, 56% of UK species have declined. The curlew declines are a reminder of that failure.

As a DEFRA Minister, I experienced lobby groups proposing that regulation would reverse losses. They were naive. In every area of life, regulation is important—I am the first to agree with that—but we never expect it to
deliver success on its own. Yet some conservation lobby groups suggest that it is possible; it is not. With the exception of some coastal areas, to which upland curlew migrate, curlew are vanishing from southern England because the young are being eaten by predators such as foxes and crows. Predators do not comply with regulations. Even putting electric fencing around nests does not yet work. In the Shropshire study, volunteers watched as foxes simply waited for the chicks to walk outside the protection of the electric fence—we can imagine the rest.

If we want to increase curlew numbers, we need to stop being squeamish and start killing some of the predators that eat the curlew young. A few will be uncomfortable with that, but it is time to focus on what works, not on what we like. I am not squeamish about killing animals such as foxes. I do not want to do it myself, but I would if I had to. I get no pleasure from it, save the satisfaction of protecting a rare and threatened species.

Some lobby groups have been incredibly successful in building their income through recruiting a large membership and then seeking to use it to influence policy. For the curlew, that has not worked. That is because, to maintain their popularity, big membership organisations avoid acknowledging that the approach they have been advocating for decades does not work, and they do not like the approaches that do work.

That lack of flexibility has resulted in farmers being paid to manage beautiful grass meadows for nesting curlew, but not to kill the animals that subsequently come along and eat the chicks. We would never allow that failure to continue for decades in other areas of Government spending—money being paid to people for no effect. Why should any conservation organisation want to use its significant lobbying power to block what works, just because it might lose a few members? One farmer in Kent said that “predator control does seem to raise strong feelings as some policy-makers have, over the years, become separated from the realities of conservation management”.

In Ireland, which faces a similar crisis, this problem is being gripped. Plans have been announced to employ staff to cull foxes, mink, crows and magpies in the vicinity of curlew nests. How refreshing to hear that that will be happening alongside habitat management—the other key factor in species conservation.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. I want to bring his attention to my own experience on farmland. We allowed patches in fields where we know we get a lot of ground-nesting birds left among crops, but to our dismay we found, a few weeks later, that carrion crows came in, took the eggs and destroyed the nests. Those areas stood out like a sore thumb, so the crows prioritised and attacked them.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Sometimes the spatial measures that one tries actually draw the attention of the predator. As a Minister, I went up to Northumberland, where I saw layer upon layer of conservation designation, and lots of public money and public bodies protecting a very special site, but nothing had been done about the cloud of crows that were going to wipe out the lapwing they were seeking to protect. We need to reassess how we do this.

The contrast between Ireland and the UK is stark. The 50 organisations that published the comprehensive “State of Nature” report last year did not mention the curlew once in its 88 pages. I do not know whether that is because the plight of the curlew is too embarrassing; it is unlikely that they simply forgot. Only a year earlier, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and others published a paper suggesting that curlew are our “most pressing bird conservation priority”.

They were right to flag that up. Our Eurasian curlew are classified globally as “near threatened”, and since we are home to 25% of the global population, we have to look after them. We should not forget that two of the other curlew species—Eskimo and slender-billed—are already assumed to be globally extinct.

Twenty years ago, English Nature, as it was then called, produced the first curlew nesting study, which reported that 64% of chick mortality was caused by predation. Study after study kept making similar observations. As the studies continued, the curlew population fell slowly and silently by 46% in just 15 years. Regulation and legal protection were not enough. The drop would have been even more dramatic if the curlew were not thriving in the north of England on driven grouse moors. On those moors, the population is maintained because fox numbers are controlled by gamekeepers. There are actually more curlew on one grouse moor in Yorkshire than there are in the whole of Wales. On farms in the south of England it is an equally bleak story.

One organisation, of which I am proud to be a Trustee, has undertaken much of the available research on controlling predators and recently launched a website offering information and practical advice for those who have curlew on their land. The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust is a charity bucking the trend. It is part of a groundswell of smaller organisations that believe the curlew will be saved only by putting farmers, not big organisations, back in control. If we do not, it fearing the only place we may soon be able to see curlew in southern England will be on nature reserves where someone is paid to control predators. Those are some of the same organisations that object to the Government funding of fox control on farmland. I would go further and suggest that we should stop funding curlew conservation projects that do not include effective predator control options. We have to do what works, not what is popular, before those wonderful birds vanish completely.

Research carried out by the GWCT revealed that predicted populations of curlew will increase by 91% where predation control takes place, and populations will reduce over the same period by 64% where it does not. So please, no more research; we need action.

I am pleased to hear of the various workshops and meetings that have taken place in recent months that have brought together many of the different groups that share my anxiety about the potential extinction of the lowland curlew. I was pleased to hear from the RSPB:

“We are investing £1.8 million in an ambitious five-year Curlew recovery programme... One of our main objectives is to test the response of breeding Curlew to a combination of habitat and predator management work.”

It specifically links foxes and crows. It stated:

“Working with a range of partners, the trial management is happening across six key sites in upland”
**Lowland Curlew**

17 OCTOBER 2017

[Richard Benyon]

not lowland—

“areas of the UK: two in Scotland, two in Northern England, one in Wales and one in Northern Ireland. This will help us identify what we need to do (and how) to help Curlew breed more successfully in the wider countryside. This might include developing policy and practice to reduce the numbers of predators in the landscape and shaping new agri-environment options to support land managers who want to do positive things for birds like the Curlew.”

That is great, but it means more research and I do not think we need more research. I do not think we need to demand more money, as some are. It seems that some want more money from a post-Brexit agricultural support mechanism that is targeted towards species such as the curlew. That is fine, but I suspect some sort of agri-environmental plan that a curlew project could slot into is already on the cards and being worked on by my hon. Friend the Minister and her team. Anyway, if we wait until 2022 when the current arrangement for farm support ends, that might be too late for the curlew in lowland England.

Then there are some who want Government money to support the voluntary work currently happening in certain areas. I am happy to support that if it is focused in the right way, but what would it be for? I would not advocate money for project officers to go around telling farmers what they should or should not do. Farmers, landowners and land managers are key to the success of any recovery project. Most already buy into plans, even at their own expense.

After 20 years of studying curlew, we know enough to take action. We need to empower, not criticise, farmers. The recent highly successful conference last week on cluster farms showed how an enlightened non-governmental organisation and charity can get huge environmental results by getting farmers to work together to pool resources and deliver real conservation in a short space of time across large landscapes.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): By way of an example and to reinforce my right hon. Friend’s comments on predator control, on the island of Caldey, just off Pembrokeshire, it was decided to simply eliminate the resident population of rats. It cost £75,000 of private money and was a straightforward operation. No permissions were necessary. Within less than a year, puffins have returned and the skylark population is improving. A relatively modest investment has brought about a transformation and, most importantly, the pest control has been profound. It has come at no social or economic cost, but I suspect that is because the problem concerned rats rather than foxes.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend talks my language. When I was briefly relevant, I managed to shoehorn something out of the Treasury to assist the RSPB, which did a superb job in annihilating mice and rats on South Georgia and other islands. As a result, South Georgia is on the fast track to returning to the pristine environment it was before the whalers arrived at the end of the 18th century, but I digress.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I stop when I see a fox. I love looking at them in the context of the environment, but when a species is threatened we have to treat all animals in the same way. We have to do things humanely in an understanding way and try to maintain a balance of nature. We cannot see species wiped out. We have to face the facts of the research that we know exists and take action.

Most land managers, like me, love their wildlife. Since they do not have large memberships to please, let us give them the practical tools and support that they need to take action. Only our farmers and land managers can save our southern curlew now. I have the highest respect for the Minister and look forward to hearing what she says. She has proved to be a fantastic listener in her role and also a fantastic doer. I hope the combination of what we say today will be a cause for celebration.

I have had the rare pleasure of lying in a meadow in Fermanagh listening to the rasping call of the corncrake. I will never hear that in Berkshire because the species now lives only in an existential state in the margins of these islands. We must not let that happen to the curlew. We owe it to future generations to do whatever we have to do to save this rare and special bird.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on securing this debate. He has set out a compelling and passionate case for saving, preserving and enhancing the life of the curlew in this country. As we know, he was one of my most successful predecessors. I appreciate his years of valued service and experience, and indeed the advice he has given me from his time when he was the Minister responsible for the natural environment.

As my right hon. Friend highlights, the curlew is among the UK’s most widespread wading birds, but its breeding range has contracted substantially in the past 50 years. As a result, and as he set out, 10 years ago the species was moved to the globally near-threatened category of the International Union for Conservation of Nature red list of threatened species. As was noted earlier in the debate, in the past 20 years the curlew population has decreased by about a half.

Supporting a quarter of the summer breeding population and a fifth of the overwintering population in global terms, the UK has an important role to play in protecting curlew. This is reflected in the fact that declines in the UK have a greater impact on the global population than in any other country. As my right hon. Friend knows from experience, the Government are absolutely committed to reversing the declines in bird populations, including curlew and other wading birds.

Declines in the curlew have been caused by a reduction in breeding. Although adult curlew are long-lived birds, very few breed successfully, and the few remaining lowland populations that have been studied show that very few, if any, chicks are produced each year. There are two principal causes of the decline in production in lowland areas. My right hon. Friend set out very clearly the predation of nests and chicks, but there is also the intensification of grassland management, especially earlier rolling and cutting of grasslands, which crushes nests and can kill chicks.
On protection, the curlew is a migratory species and there is an obligation to classify special protection areas under article 4 of the birds directive, which requires the provision of SPAs. The UK network of more than 270 SPAs covers about 2.8 million hectares of key habitats. There are currently 87 SPAs in England, of which 13 have been classified for non-breeding curlew. There are currently no SPAs classified for breeding curlew in England or elsewhere in the UK, but reviews of the network show that the north Pennine moors—admittedly not lowlands—are the single most important site in England for breeding curlew.

A third of curlew overwintering in Britain use habitat provided as part of those SPAs. I recognise that that is only part of protecting the species, but increasing that suitable habitat and then focusing on breeding success in upland and lowland grasslands is vital. We have to have an international action plan for curlew. We are contributing internationally to actions to address that in our role as a signatory to the African-Eurasian migratory waterbird agreement, notably through the national implementation of our international action plan for the species, which was adopted two years ago.

The long-term goal of that plan is to restore the favourable conservation status of the curlew throughout its AEW A range, and for it to be assessed by 2025 as “least concern” against the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s red list criteria. The short-term aims are to stabilise breeding population declines, to improve knowledge relating to the population and conservation status, and for any hunting activity to be sustainable.

In spring last year, an Ireland and UK curlew action group was formed by a range of organisations, including our country’s conservation agencies, the RSPB and the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust to co-ordinate conservation measures. The group is meeting for the third time, but as my right hon. Friend points out, talking is challenging when it is time for action.

Activities already under way include Natural England working with the RSPB on a recovery programme aimed at providing a co-ordinated approach to the management of curlew habitats, including predator control, to increase breeding numbers. That forms part of the international action plan to address the “near threatened” status of the curlew.

My right hon. Friend argued passionately for the increased use of predator control in the protection of curlew, and was reinforced in that by my hon. Friends the Members for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) and for York Outer (Julian Sturdy). I absolutely agree that control of predators such as foxes and stoats has a role to play in the recovery of rare or declining species, particularly ground-nesting birds.

As my right hon. Friend knows, predator control already takes place throughout the countryside as part of normal farming and game-keeping practice. It is true that predation at the egg stage is common in some areas and control of those predators has a role to play in their recovery. However, that control should be effective and not lead to making the predators themselves extinct.

A number of species predate curlew nests and chicks in the lowlands, including red fox, carrion crows and badgers. The relative importance of different predators differs locally. Land-use changes can have an impact on curlew populations through support of predators, so there is sometimes the interesting challenge of fragmented landscapes—where we may introduce patches of woodland—that have often been shown to support greater numbers of predators, but can be beneficial in other aspects of biodiversity.

Areas where predators are managed, such as areas managed for grouse shooting, have higher rates of breeding success, as my right hon. Friend illustrated, and we have seen a threefold increase in curlew abundance. The question of predator-prey interactions, however, is not straightforward. A variety of research shows that predators are part of a complex mix of factors that can influence prey populations. I am assured by my scientific advisers that the research shows that, although predation is the main reason for egg and chick losses in many bird species, most can withstand high levels of predation. There may be local short-lived benefits and we need to consider long-lasting measures.

Richard Benyon: Will the Minister go back to her officials? I entirely accept that populations of certain species can withstand levels of predation as long as there are plenty of them, but when there is a very small number of a declining species, there is no margin for error. We can do as much habitat preservation as possible, but if we do not include this part of the piece—predator control—then that margin for error means that we will continue to see a decline.

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend, dare I say it, needs to wait for the conclusion of my speech, which I have rewritten during the debate.

I wholeheartedly agree that we need to empower farmers. He will know that our agri-environment schemes have been designed with the aim of encouraging habitat management to promote conservation in targeted areas, whether that is about suitable nesting or foraging conditions. We are delivering significant areas of habitat for wading birds, including the curlew. About 600,000 hectares from the predecessor schemes are managed for wading birds, and since 2016 Countryside Stewardship has provided 10,000 hectares under the new schemes.

A payment-by-results approach currently being piloted in the Yorkshire dales includes looking at habitat, but I want to stress to my right hon. Friend that farmers are able to manage the land as they wish. They are paid on the suitability of the habitat that they provide, but they can undertake predator control. That is farmers’ choice. It is important to stress that they have absolute clearance from the Minister responsible. It is about managing habitat, but they are also free to use techniques to ensure that predator control does not undermine the intended outcome of the project.

In highlighting projects to help curlew decline, my right hon. Friend rightly praises the work of the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, including their action for curlew project launched earlier this year. However, GWCT states that it is not just about predator control. We have to make sure that we get a balance of dry resting areas, wet foraging areas, and insect-rich grassland for chicks in spring and summer. Through that combination of proactive habitat management and predator control where required, we can bring about positive change for curlew.
Safeguarding Adults with Learning Disabilities

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

I am also conscious of the RSPB’s upper Thames wader project, which is working with more than 200 farmers to create, restore and manage wetland grasslands to support species including curlew. That area now supports the largest population of curlew on lowland farmland and again demonstrates the importance of providing habitat and feeding resources for birds and chicks.

My right hon. Friend may well be aware of the curlew country project in Shropshire, which brings together local communities to raise awareness and monitor local curlew populations. I understand that, although they may not be having quite the impact that he rightly demands, in raising awareness and bringing communities together to work to preserve the curlew, they do valuable work that we should not underestimate.

I am genuinely grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. He will be aware, from his time as a Minister, that in a portfolio as wide as the natural environment, it often does take debates to get some focus on a particular topic. He has passionately set out why we need effective action, and I agree. That is why I will be asking Natural England and policy officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to include the use of predator control in all current and future projects that we fund. It is important to me that it is at least considered, and that reasons are given for why it is or—equally importantly—why it is not included in a particular scheme.

My right hon. Friend will understand that we need to undertake an appropriate mix of actions, including protecting important sites, working with farmers and other land managers to manage these habitats carefully, and targeting legal predator control to halt, and then reverse, the decline of this iconic species. The curlew is too important to be lost from our world’s biodiversity.

As I set out earlier, our actions matter because a substantial proportion of these birds winter or breed in the United Kingdom. We need to make this a success, so that England and lowland curlew can continue to have the bright future for which my right hon. Friend hopes.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.
co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships, that that requirement has recently been lifted for people with learning disabilities, following a review led by the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard).

I am regularly lobbied by constituents with learning disabilities who, with the support and encouragement of the Newcastle-based charity Better Days, are able to send me easy-read letters about issues of concern, such as the lessons to be learned from the independent review of deaths of people with a learning disability conducted following the tragic death of Connor Sparrowhawk, or the Government’s decision no longer to provide funding to the National Forum of People with Learning Disabilities, which meant it closed in March 2017, having been operational since 2001.

There is a variety of good support out there, but we all know that many people with learning disabilities, and their families and carers, will face a series of enormous challenges, barriers and indeed discrimination throughout their lives, all of which inevitably puts a great deal of strain on family relationships. What do those barriers involve for people with learning disabilities?

Mencap highlights that children with special educational needs are twice as likely as other children to be bullied regularly; 40% of disabled children live in poverty; and 75% of GPs have received no training to help them treat people with a learning disability. The House of Commons Library has noted the evidence that people with a learning disability experience inequalities in healthcare and the fact that, on average, men with a learning disability die 13 years sooner and women with a learning disability 20 years sooner than those without learning disabilities.

Learning Disability Today has reported on a survey that found that almost two thirds of parents of children with learning disabilities said that they missed social engagements in the past year due to the fear of how other people would react to them; one in four young people with a learning disability had been bullied by members of the public at nightclubs or concerts; and only 30% of people would feel comfortable sitting next to someone with a mild learning disability at a show or a concert.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I hear what the hon. Lady is saying about GPs. Does she think that it would be useful if training were made available to MPs and their staff to deal with such situations?

Catherine McKinnell: That is an interesting suggestion. As a constituency MP, I work closely with the organisations I have mentioned so that I may correspond with and represent people with learning disabilities. There are local solutions and, potentially, national ways to support MPs. That is a good suggestion to ensure that those voices are heard in Parliament, and the intention of this debate is very much to give voice to some of the concerns. I am sure that other hon. Members are present in its response to the Equality and Human Rights Commission report, “Being disabled in Britain: a journey less equal”, which was published earlier this year.

In responding to the EHRC report back in April, Mencap commented:

“Rather than move forwards in the past 20 years this report shows how inadequate action and a constant stream of cuts have condemned disabled people to a life of poverty and inequality.

With the employment rate for people with a learning disability currently standing at less than 6% and with cuts to Employment Support Allowance coming into effect this week, it’s not hard to see why so many disabled people are struggling to find money for things as basic as food. People with a learning disability also face inadequate housing, poor access to health care and a society that misunderstands them.”

One challenge facing people with learning disabilities and their families is of course being able to access the right social care support at a time when adult social care budgets are at breaking point after years of punitive cuts to local authority funding since 2010, combined with rising cost pressures. The Local Government Association outlines that some 127,725 adults in England under the age of 65 were receiving long-term social care from their local council for a learning disability in 2015-16, meaning that about one third of councils’ annual social care spending, or approximately £5 billion, is used to support adults with learning disabilities.

The LGA also highlights, however, that the number of adults with a learning disability needing social care is set to rise by 3% a year, piling further pressure on local authority finances. Overall, councils face a £2.3 billion shortage in funding by 2020. I therefore strongly urge the Chancellor to address this issue next month as part of his autumn Budget, as well as the ongoing and serious concerns about the potential historic and future costs associated with sleep-ins, following the change in Government guidance on them, which have significant implications for the future provision of support to adults with learning disabilities.

As I said, there is a particular reason that I secured this debate, which I have been trying to do so for several months. Undoubtedly, all Members of Parliament frequently have to handle very distressing issues, and I have dealt with a lot.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a valiant attempt. This is a very difficult subject and she is talking about a very distressing and tragic case. To go back to the point about greater public awareness, I have been a Member for 12 years and have certainly never been offered any training about learning disabilities. There is so much to know and she has just given us a useful range of facts. I encourage the Minister to take away what my hon. Friend has just raised as things we should all know.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. It is hard to imagine a more harrowing and disturbing case than that of Lee Irving. My thoughts remain very much with Lee’s family, particularly his mother, Bev, who I know is determined to ensure that something positive comes of her son’s death. I am sorry; I must do this subject the justice of staying composed. I am particularly conscious that Lee’s mother is watching this debate online in Newcastle and that having to relive what happened to her son clearly will always be upsetting. However, it is important that right hon. and hon. Members appreciate the gravity of this case.
Lee was a 24-year-old vulnerable young man with learning disabilities from the West Denton area of my constituency, who was tragically murdered in 2015. In the months leading up to his death, he was living on and off—perhaps existing would be a better word—with a group of people he had befriended and trusted, at their home in the Kenton Bar area of Newcastle. During that time, he was the victim of sustained abuse and exploitation. Lee’s mother, Bev, had reported him missing on three occasions in the weeks before his death, and indeed had alerted the authorities to where he was staying and of her serious concerns about Lee’s safety, given the previous behaviour of those individuals towards her son.

Tragically, Lee’s badly beaten body was found on 6 June 2015, dumped on a grass bank near the A1 in Newcastle, not far from the house he had been occupying with those who were accused of his murder. The cause of Lee’s death was given as respiratory failure due to multiple severe injuries that were inflicted upon him at the house in Kenton Bar between 28 May and 5 June 2015. The injuries included fractures to his nose and jaw, the fracture of 24 ribs and damage to underlying organs, after he had been drugged with a combination of morphine, Valium and buprenorphine—medication used by heroin addicts—which enabled his attackers to conduct sustained physical beatings against him. The four people responsible for Lee’s death also prevented him from receiving the urgent medical attention that he clearly required on several occasions.

Following Lee’s death, a safeguarding adults review was established to hear from the myriad organisations and agencies involved in providing support to Lee and his family during his short life. The review explains:

“The relationship between Lee Irving and his killers was described as one of subservience with Lee beholden to the primary perpetrator”—

James Wheatley—

“for drugs and shelter and where Lee looked up to the primary perpetrator and desperate to fit in tolerated continued violence and abuse. This coercion and drugging were used to control him, prevent him seeking help and over a period of time drawing him back to the house at 33 Studdon Walk.”

Indeed, Mencap has informed me of its concern that Lee’s case is not an isolated one, commenting:

“There are many examples, both reported and unreported, of people with a learning disability who have been abused physically and psychologically by people who they thought were friends. This has given rise to the phrase ‘mate crime’, where individuals take advantage of someone’s vulnerabilities, bullying them physically, psychologically or stealing money or possessions.”

I believe that the safeguarding adults review instigated after Lee’s death raises serious issues, not just for Newcastle, but about how we, as a wider society, support and safeguard adults with learning disabilities. Vida Morris, chair of the Newcastle Safeguarding Adults Board, said after the review had been published:

“Lee’s story will be used locally, regionally and nationally to improve safeguarding and protect vulnerable adults.”

That absolutely must be the case.

It is evident from the review that Lee’s vulnerabilities, which were the result of his learning disability, were clearly identified by a number of local agencies some years before and right up to his death. On six occasions between 2010 and 2014, different organisations considered the risk to Lee to be such as to merit formal multi-agency adult safeguarding written referrals. Examples of Lee’s known vulnerability include an assessment undertaken by Percy Hedley School when he was nearly 18, which described him as “socially immature and impressionable, a very vulnerable young man who could not ignore people who are distracting him, naïve in social situations, easily influenced by others, and unable to identify people’s motivations and intentions.”

The national probation service in Northumbria had numerous interactions with Lee, as he was arrested 30 times between May 2011 and March 2013 for various offences. In December 2012, Lee was sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment for the offences of burglary and theft, and was “treated as an adult fully responsible for his own actions and able to understand the consequences of the measures imposed.”

Yet the year before, in 2011, the NPS carried out an assessment of Lee and identified that he was “incredibly vulnerable to the influence and harmful behaviour of others he encounters; that he was financially vulnerable from others. In addition, he was assessed as being vulnerable in custody and in a hostel setting.”

A further NPS assessment stated:

“Lee seems to understand that he is being used and bullied but seems to put up with it rather than be rejected by his peers.”

Another commented:

“Lee is not aware of the risks that he places himself in e.g. spending time with homeless people, sleeping rough, sharing taxis with strangers and giving his clothes and money away. His level of Learning Disability means that he behaves in a way which is focussed on pleasing people, to develop acceptance within groups and possibly to gain kudos through offending for others.”

Despite those assessments, no safeguarding alert was raised by the NPS about Lee Irving during its interaction with him in 2011 and 2012.

An assessment carried out in 2010—five years before Lee’s death—under the Mental Capacity Act 2005 confirmed that Lee’s overall reasoning and thinking abilities were the same as or better than only 0.2% of adults his own age. In other words, Lee’s intellectual abilities placed him in the bottom 1% of adults his own age. There is also a concern that Lee’s intellectual ability may at times have been overestimated, because his relatively better verbal skills may have masked his deficits in other areas.

In March 2015, shortly before Lee’s death, a further Mental Capacity Act assessment was undertaken, at which both he and his family were present, after his family reported that he had returned to live with the people who were exploiting him. That assessment identified that he did not have the capacity to make decisions to keep himself safe when alone in the community. The assessment resulted in an exploration of supported living options, which were still being explored at the time of his death.

The safeguarding adults review notes:

“Throughout his long engagement with services Lee failed to attend nearly half his numerous appointments with various services. While in his early teenage years his family often ensured his attendance, when in his late teens, his family’s influence declined and his chaotic lifestyle led to less frequent attendance at appointments, making it . . . difficult for . . . agencies to deliver the care and support that Lee needed.”
I find it hard to understand why that behaviour did not set more alarm bells ringing about Lee’s welfare, given that his vulnerabilities were well documented.

The review further states that

“Lee’s life slid into a chaotic cycle of offending, being reported missing and associating with so-called ‘friends’ who exploited him. In October 2014 a decision was taken to award Lee with a direct payment—giving him control of some of his moneys in order to directly purchase services or other forms of support... later that control passed to Lee himself.”

Again, given the circumstances in which Lee was living and the fact that his mother was already reporting that he was being financially exploited, I find that hard to understand.

Tragically, given what was to happen later, the police actually attended the address at which Lee was being held between 28 May and 5 June 2015, when we know that Lee was inside the house and already injured. However, no search was conducted, despite Lee having been reported missing by his mother, her belief that he was at the house and the police being aware of the extensive criminal records of those living at the property, including for violent offences.

The safeguarding review notes:

“It is clear that all agencies tried hard to deliver a service to Lee and/or his family but on many occasions this was made difficult due to Lee’s lack of engagement and his determination to keep bad company...these efforts were not adequately co-ordinated or led by each of the main agencies...Throughout the long engagement with agencies the lead changed according to the circumstances...Therefore, no agency was able to take overall responsibility for co-ordination and leadership, however, as noted in the report agencies were in contact on a regular basis with each other.”

The review adds:

“Lee Irving was a difficult person to help. His reluctance to engage with services and his failure to attend appointments made it extremely difficult for agencies to support him and his family. Despite this, agencies persisted in their attempts to help and protect him. It is clear that all agencies approached Lee Irving with the best of intentions.”

I continue from the review:

“Many agencies were involved in Lee’s complex case over a lengthy period. They saw him in different ways according to their discipline and...many did not appreciate the risk attached to his lifestyle and disability. There were, however, clear indications of Lee Irving’s vulnerabilities and recorded Safeguarding Alerts pointing to the threats present at the house at 33 Studdon Walk where he lived latterly and where he was killed...his specific vulnerabilities were accurately identified. The cumulative effects of these risk factors were not, however, weighed or considered in a multi-agency forum when planning for his care.”

The review also made clear:

“Perhaps as a consequence of a lack of co-ordination a number of options for intervening in the case of Lee Irving were not considered. No legal advice was sought from agencies solicitors and the possibility of Court of Protection proceedings or other legal options”—

deprivation of liberty—

“were not pursued.”

Whether any of those options would have succeeded in intervening in Lee Irving’s decline and eventual death will never be known.

Extremely worryingly, the safeguarding adults review suggested that:

“The behaviour of Lee was perhaps interpreted by some professionals as consistent with his choice of an antisocial and criminal lifestyle. Whilst not held by all agencies this interpretation meant that his criminal conduct was not always considered as a symptom of his disability, increasing vulnerability or the exploitation that he was subject to.”

Of particular concern to Lee’s mother, Bev, following her son’s death, are the challenges that parents of adult children with learning difficulties face in continuing to be involved in decisions about their care. The safeguarding adults review outlined that Lee’s family “described the difference in the way professionals were able to respond to Lee as an adult as being frustrating and difficult to understand...Lee was...classed as an adult while his mental capacity remained that of a child”.

It also recorded that, on Lee reaching adulthood, Lee’s family “felt excluded from some of the key decisions about his care. They felt that some professionals excluded or disregarded them and that decisions about options for the ongoing care of their family member were made without their input. In particular, they express severe concern that despite their specific warnings about Lee’s living conditions at the home at Studdon Walk, the measures taken to protect him were unsuccessful.

In conclusion, the family felt that while more should have been done to protect Lee towards the end of his life such was Lee’s determination to place himself at risk that only secure accommodation would have protected him. Whilst they had resisted this option at the time, with the benefit of hindsight they recognise that other measures were unlikely to have succeeded.”

Indeed, following the publication of the review in June, Lee’s mother, Bev, commented:

“Nobody listened to each other, but my main concern was nobody listened to me. If I had been listened to, then my son would still be alive now. I had my son reported missing three times in the previous few weeks up until his death and they wouldn’t bring him back. They wouldn’t inform me where he was, which I find very, very hurtful. It’s disgusting.”

In response to that, the director of people at Newcastle City Council stated:

“I know that Lee’s family felt excluded from some of the decisions that were taken about his care and that their warnings about his living conditions were not acted upon effectively. For that we are truly sorry.”

The safeguarding adults review highlighted that Lee’s family “had two main recommendations” following their son’s death. First, that “the move from Children’s to Adults’ services be better managed to ensure a smoother transition without loss of support and that services consider the capacity rather than the age of the individual.”

Secondly, that “families remain part of the decision-making process in the case of vulnerable adults and be fully involved/consulted on ‘best interest’ and other decisions relating to family members.”

Bev Irving has explained that she hopes those changes will be made so that, in her words,

“Lee’s name can live on in the name of Lee’s law”.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the recommendations and whether the Government can act on them to help ensure that the lessons from Lee’s case are genuinely learned across the country.

There is one further aspect to the case that I find deeply concerning. James Wheatley was found guilty of murdering Lee in December 2016. His mother, Julie Mills, his then girlfriend, Nicole Lawrence, and Barry
Imray, who also had learning disabilities, were found guilty of, or admitted to, conspiring to pervert the course of justice and causing or allowing the death of a vulnerable person. Wheatley was sentenced to a minimum 23-year term and the original sentences of Mills and Lawrence were increased after the Crown Prosecution Service successfully appealed them as being unduly lenient, with the support of the Solicitor General. I know that the family are grateful for that.

Both the CPS and Northumbria police believed that the multiple and horrific offences perpetrated against Lee were motivated by his disability. Indeed, the safeguarding adults review commenced with that view. However, the trial judge, in his sentencing remarks, told Wheatley that

“In order to reach the conclusion”

that the offence was aggravated by disability

“the statute requires me to be sure that, at the time of committing the offence or immediately before or after doing so, you demonstrated hostility towards Lee Irving based on his disability or that your offence was motivated by hostility towards persons who have this or any disability. I am not satisfied on either basis. Although your texts”

to one of the other accused

“show repeated use of the repellent word ‘spastic’, I am not able to infer that such language was used towards Lee Irving at the time or immediately before or after your murderous assault. Furthermore, in my judgment you were motivated in this offence not by hostility towards those with disability but by your vicious and bullying nature which particularly takes advantage of those who are unable or less able to resist.”

That calls into question whether the current legislation—section 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which provides for an aggravated sentence—is fit for purpose, as it is unclear how anyone could prove a disability hate crime under the threshold unless the perpetrator made such an admission. I raised this issue with the Solicitor General, to which I received a response that the judge’s “finding that the offences were not motivated by hostility is a finding of fact. Such findings are incredibly difficult...to challenge on appeal to the Court of Appeal, since I need to satisfy the court not only that the judge was plainly wrong, but also that it is in the interests of justice to overturn his finding of fact.

My decision was that I would not succeed in overturning the finding of fact in this particular case. I only reached this conclusion after receiving advice from the leading counsel at trial, the CPS’ hate crime stakeholder manager, and a senior barrister who is a specialist in these kind of cases. I also looked at general advice from First Senior Treasury Counsel, the Government’s most senior barrister in criminal matters, on how to apply the hate crime provisions.”

I am aware that the CPS has recently published revised guidance setting out the factors to be taken into consideration when reviewing cases and prosecuting offences classified as disability hate crime. However, in Lee Irving’s case the issue was not with the police or CPS not recording or prosecuting the barbaric offences committed against him as disability hate crimes but that the judge could not be sure that, at the time of committing the offence, or immediately before or afterwards, the perpetrator demonstrated hostility towards Lee based on his disability, or that the offence was motivated by hostility towards people with disabilities—the threshold set in the existing legislation. That is concerning at a time when we know that disability hate crime is a significant issue.

Mencap highlights that some 73% of people with a learning disability and autism responding to a 2016 Dimensions survey said that they had experienced hate crime, while recorded hate crime based on disability has increased by 44% since last year. The true extent of the problem is being masked by people with a disability or learning disability who are too scared or do not feel able to report incidents. I strongly urge the Minister to ensure that the Government look at this issue again, in the light of Lee’s case, although I am conscious that it is not within her departmental remit.

I fully recognise that I have raised a number of wide-ranging issues this afternoon, many of which do not fall directly within the Minister’s portfolio. However, I am pleased to have been able to put on record the different, and very important, concerns that Lee’s mother has raised with me following her son’s death. Those ultimately responsible for Lee Irving’s horrific abuse and murder are now locked up in prison where they belong. Indeed, thanks to the intervention of the Solicitor General, some sentences were increased for being unduly lenient. However, the current legislation needs to be reviewed, because if Lee’s case could not be regarded as a disability hate crime, it is hard to know how the current threshold could be met.

I have also outlined how important it is for adults with learning disabilities to receive the right care and support to enable them to live independent lives where that is appropriate. However, I have real concerns about the issues raised by Lee’s case, and the fact that those charged with safeguarding Lee—an extremely vulnerable adult—did not get the balance right between independence and protection. Nor does it appear that the many agencies that interacted with Lee shared information with each other about his vulnerabilities, or properly listened to or acted on the concerns repeatedly raised by his family, which might have resulted in Lee still being here today.

It is critical that lessons are learned from Lee Irving’s case as quickly as possible, right across the country. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how she intends to ensure that that will be the case.

3 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I will not make a long intervention, but I put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for raising that case, which was clearly a distressing one, as the emotions she has shown illustrate. What she said about the safeguarding rules is absolutely crucial, and all our county councils could take note of those and ensure that they follow them clearly. My concern is always about the gap that might exist between the safeguarding rules that apply to children and those that apply to young adults. The gap that can emerge there causes many problems, so the more we can do about it, the better.

I make a suggestion to the hon. Lady. She has raised a lot of concerns about the law, and I wonder whether, if she could gather together enough evidence to make a presentation to the Select Committee on Justice, it might be willing to take up an inquiry into a review of this area, which would provide further support for her efforts to change the law. I cannot speak for the Justice Committee, even though I am a member of it, but I think it is worth her trying to gather as much information as possible to take that forward.
I completely agree with the hon. Lady that we need to look after people with learning disabilities. In my constituency we try to do that in a number of ways outside the council county system. First, the Ways & Means Trust’s operation in my constituency tries to provide in-work experience for young people with learning disabilities by providing them with garden centre experience. They are trained in how to look after flowers, how to bag pots—if hon. Members see what I mean—and eventually how to sell them. At Christmas time in particular, it is a useful place to go to get wreaths and things like that, made by people with learning disabilities. That is a good way of showing that we care and of providing them with enormous opportunities to fulfil their lives by holding jobs that are meaningful and keep them in work.

Secondly, an event called the Regatta for the Disabled occurs in my constituency every autumn. I have been involved since its commencement some seven years ago, usually in opening and competering it. The regatta provides an opportunity for people with physical and learning disabilities to enjoy the river. It provides boat trips for them and allows them to share with others their enjoyment of life and what they can do. One would need to be there to see their physical enjoyment of life; it is absolutely catching. I point that out as a way in which my own constituency tries to look after people with learning disabilities.

Finally, every year, with the help of Mencap, we bring together all those people with learning disabilities who are able to come in the town square in Henley, and we sing to the population who come along and do their shopping, stop and have a cup of coffee and listen to the singing. The quality of the singing and the enthusiasm with which people with learning disabilities take it up are amazing. I am convinced that, by putting the effort into ensuring that we understand and care for people with learning disabilities, we can achieve a vast amount.

3.5 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to sum up the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. It is customary at this stage to congratulate the hon. Member who has brought the debate, but those words do not do justice to what the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) has brought before us.

This is an incredibly tragic, harrowing and cruel case, and she has done her constituent and his family a great service in bringing it to the House. She should be congratulated on her perseverance in ensuring that the story was heard today; the manner in which she covered such tragic and horrendous issues was commendable and incredibly honourable. I pay considerable tribute to her for her contribution and I thank her for it, and I am sure the House does also. I am also sorry that there were not more hon. Members in the Chamber to hear what happened. I am sure we all, as constituency MPs and representatives as well as parliamentarians, will have taken note of what happened in Lee Irving’s case, and will hopefully have learned lessons for ourselves and our local services as well.

The case that the hon. Lady raised covered unspeakable cruelty and was harrowing and devastating to hear; it was probably one of the hardest things I have had to hear in my time as a parliamentarian, particularly in the Chamber. Most concerning are Mencap saying that this is possibly not an isolated case and the history of missed opportunities in the handling of this case with clear warning signs and failures from a variety of services that should have supported him to get on, but sadly let him down.

I am also very sorry for Lee’s mother, Bev; if she is watching and listening, this will be incredibly difficult. As a father, my worst nightmare must be losing a child, but to do so in such cruel and painful circumstances must be an incredible torment. My heart goes out to her. It is unspeakable, and I am so glad that, in the end, it appears that justice has been done and that those murderers are behind bars and serving the time they deserve for their horrible crime.

Most aspects of the issues discussed are devolved, so forgive me for raising some of what is happening in Scotland. It would not be right for me to comment too heavily on aspects of the case, as much of it is a matter for England and Wales. The SNP Government acknowledge that transformational change is needed for disabled people of all ages to realise their full potential. That is why the Scottish Government are working with partners towards the long-term ambition of halving the disability employment gap in Scotland. In 2015, the employment rate in Scotland for those who were Equality Act-disabled was 42%, compared with 80.3% for those who were not. It was 73.1% for the total population aged 16 to 64. We will work to reduce the barriers to employment for disabled people and will redress the imbalance of disabled people making up only 12% of the private and public sector workforce in Scotland.

The SNP Government are also working with the national skills agency, Skills Development Scotland, to make modern apprenticeships more open, attractive and available to people with disabilities. The SNP is also committed to promoting and protecting equality and human rights for disabled people. We want to make sure that disabled people can take part fully in all areas of daily and public life. We are working to break down the barriers to independent living that people may face. Living an independent life is important to people with learning disabilities. That means having the same choice and control in their lives that others have.

The Scottish Government have taken practical steps such as supporting disabled and young people and their families from birth, through school and into the world of work. We are also investing £5.4 million over the next two years to improve learning disability services in Scotland. We are continuing our work to create a fairer and more equal society through our draft delivery plan, which sets out the steps we will take over the next four years to implement the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. We are also consulting disabled people and the organisations that represent them, including the likes of Mencap, to bring the voice of disabled people into the heart of Government in Scotland.

We are committed to the independent living fund and will protect the funding for it. The Deputy First Minister announced in April 2014 that the new Scottish independent living fund would be set up following the decision here in Westminster to close the fund. On 1 July 2015, the Independent Living Fund Scotland came into force and now administers the Scottish and Northern Irish
What horrified me most was all of the warnings and the fact that the family had flagged up that they felt they were not part of the decisions. The hon. Lady said something similar in a letter that I received from her. The family had flagged up that they felt they were not part of the decisions. The hon. Lady said something similar in a letter that I received from her.

I was proud to serve as a disabilities Minister. I did a lot of national news and interviews, which were normally quite tricky. That was when I heard for the first time the statistic that only 6% of those with a learning disability could expect to find employment, in contrast with around 80% of people across the population. That is by far the worst statistic of any disability. Yet at the same time, when we meet anybody with a learning disability, particularly young people, they have an incredible amount of enthusiasm, energy and determination. It is not necessarily the case that all of them will be able to have a full-time job. For some, an hour a week is the equivalent of landing a dream job. We talk to their families and friends, and people with learning disabilities are all united in wanting an opportunity to contribute and to feel part of society.

I was greatly impressed when I visited Foxes hotel in Bridgwater. It was one of my favourite visits. The hotel had taken part in a TV programme, which I had seen, so I recognised some of the young adults when I went there. I was star-struck and demanded lots of photographs.

The hotel offered a three-year course for the young adults. There were two roles. In the first role, they developed independent living skills. They would start by being heavily supervised and over the three years would become more and more independent until the end of their three-year experience, when they would go into a separate house. That equipped them with the skills they needed to have the best chance to live independently, because once people get to 25, they really need them. A lot of these people rely on their family and friends, and the biggest fear for family and friends relates to when their health starts to fail, because who will be there to look after them? The course was brilliant and the young adults were really well equipped.

The second part involved developing skills that would give the young adults an opportunity to work. The hotel worked with the other hotels, restaurants and care homes across Bridgwater and the surrounding areas to train them in the skills where there were job vacancies. It was key that there were job vacancies for them. Towards the end, they would spend their final year working in the hotels, restaurants and care homes and taking on different roles. They were supervised with patient training, because it takes them longer to pick up a role, but by the end the vast majority remained in employment. Some 80% remained in employment, of which half were paid.

The course was brilliant. One lad I saw celebrated his birthday shortly afterwards. His employers baked him a cake and they sent me a wonderful picture. I was really touched by that. We made sure that each and every one of those young adults was given the best opportunity to have an independent life and to participate and engage constructively in society, and the employers benefited. They were not doing this for charity, but were filling
I called the headteacher involved and she was very cynical about politics, which she made clear in her speech. We all hear those. We go on visits and they do not always roll out the red carpet when we turn up. However, she saw my enthusiasm and acknowledged that in her speech. I said to her, “I need to talk to you in more detail. I need to understand why there isn’t a Foxes hotel in every single constituency,” so she came to Parliament.

Ultimately, it came down to two things. The first was the postcode lottery of funding. In some towns we have brilliant examples where things go really well, but there are too many towns where the system is not joined up, where there are not the opportunities and where there is too much demand and not enough supply.

Secondly, that final year, which is a supervised work placement, was very expensive. That capped the number of young adults who were given that amazing opportunity. That was when I said, “Why is this not an apprenticeship?” It is work-based learning, something that all politicians support. We all want more apprenticeships. They said they could not access the apprenticeship system, because most of the young adults would not get a grade C in GCSE maths and English.

I therefore organised a meeting with the then Minister at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). I said to him, “We have got to get this sorted,” and he agreed 100%. His officials fell about on the floor and had to be scraped back up and gently reminded him, “We don’t want to dilute the perceived quality of apprenticeships.” I said, “I don’t care; rename it. Call it a disability apprenticeship. We just need access to the funding. I am not proud how we do it.” We came up with a cunning plan to ask my hon. Friend the Minister to continue to remind Ministers at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about the power that sport has. Thirdly, tackling the postcode lottery is an absolute must.

As other hon. Members have done, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). It is usual to congratulate another Member on securing such an important debate, and she has been persistent in trying to secure this one; the dignified and passionate way in which she set out a case is an honour to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Wilson. As other hon. Members have done, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). It is usual to congratulate another Member on securing such an important debate, and she has been persistent in trying to secure this one; the dignified and passionate way in which she set out a deeply tragic case made it an important speech to listen to.

As my hon. Friend said, Lee Irving’s extreme vulnerability due to his learning disability was known about three years before the tragic murder of her constituent. It is disturbing that, despite knowing that, the national probation service did not raise an alarm or a safeguarding alert. As we heard, Lee was being treated as an adult, not a vulnerable adult. The failings highlighted by the safeguarding adults review in the case of Lee Irving, as well as the safeguarding adults review in the case of Lee Irving, include a failure to involve his family in decisions about his future. Mencap has highlighted the fact that only 1% of hate crimes reported against disabled people result in prosecutions.

Mencap has also called for greater public awareness of learning disabilities. It is important that we have talked about that issue in this debate, and that we have realised that MPs do not have much training on it. Clearly, there is much to know, and many of us could help with that and bring about greater public awareness. I shall say more later about the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and the impact that it can have on the families of people with learning disabilities, and their ability to stay involved in decisions about vulnerable people such as Lee Irving. I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North that lessons must be learned from his case. There is much to learn.
I want to mention the campaign Justice for LB, which was set up to campaign on learning disability issues following the tragic death of Connor Sparrowhawk while he was in the care of Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North touched on the case earlier.

We have discussed issues at Southern Health a number of times in debates, because Members of the House have had deep concerns about the safety of the care and services provided by the trust. Connor Sparrowhawk was left to drown in a bath; and there were many other deaths. The Mazars investigation, commissioned by NHS England, looked at all deaths at the trust between April 2011 and March 2015. It found that during that period 10,306 people had died. Most deaths were expected, but 1,454 were not. The likelihood of an unexpected death being investigated by the trust depended on the type of patient. The most likely group of deaths to be investigated was deaths among adults with mental health problems, of which 30% were investigated. For those with a learning disability the figure was just 1%. Parents and families left bereaved and grieving want to see accountability, but too often they do not.

There has not, for example, been accountability at Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. In fact, the opposite has happened. Last October, I asked the Health Secretary to investigate the way the Southern Health Trust created a sideways move, to an advisory role at the same salary, for Katrina Percy, the chief executive who was criticised for leading the trust through the time when it failed to investigate all those patient deaths. Six weeks later she resigned from that newly created advisory role and received a £190,000 salary pay-off that was signed off by the Department of Health and the Treasury. How does the Minister think that makes bereaved and grieving parents feel? Justice for LB called the pay-off “utterly disgraceful”, and I agree with that, but the Health Secretary would not investigate it.

Campaigns such as Justice for LB are asking that provision for people with learning disabilities should be an integral part of health and care services—not a specialist branch that can be ignored, as it appears to be, having been ignored at the trust in question. They believe that the law should be changed so that every unexpected death in a secure or locked unit is automatically investigated independently. It is also an important point of crossover with the case that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North put so well today that they want to stop the Mental Capacity Act 2005 from being used to distance families and isolate people—particularly young people.

The Justice for LB campaign, which obviously focuses on different issues from those relating to Lee Irving, has asked for a critical look to be taken at the system of inspection and regulation under which catastrophic events have happened—as they have: from Winterbourne View to the Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust there are too many. Sadly, failures carry on over many years. Last week, Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust was fined £125,000 after a prosecution in the case of a patient who fell from the roof of the mental health complex of Melbury Lodge in Winchester. The prosecution was brought following the injuries sustained by a patient known as Mr AB. Since 2010, a number of patients detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 had climbed onto the roof of Melbury Lodge in a bid to abscond. The trust’s own security review had recommended safety measures, including anti-climb guttering, but those improvements had not been made.

Mr AB had climbed onto the roof earlier, in March 2012, slipping twice and nearly falling before he was brought down. Three years later, he was admitted to Melbury Lodge again. His family were so worried that he might try again to abscond and climb on to the roof that they asked the staff to keep a close eye on him. However, in the early hours of a morning in December 2015, Mr AB again climbed on the roof of the lodge and fell to the ground, sustaining very serious neck injuries. Despite that accident, three more patients were able to gain access to the roof in February 2016, two months later, and one of them was injured.

The court was told that the trust had not taken action to deal with the risk as there was no money to spend on the remedial work. This is a trust that paid a consultancy firm more than £5 million for a contract originally tendered for £288,000, while another firm was awarded a contract for £600,000, for which it did not even have to bid. It makes things worse that both companies awarded contracts were run by former colleagues of the trust’s chief executive, Katrina Percy. Nearly £6 million of NHS funding went from that trust to a company called Talent Works, described as experts in culture and behaviour change. It is not good enough that an NHS trust spends £6 million on culture and behaviour change consultants when it cannot get the basics right and safeguard its patients or a young person put in its care.

Those events, and everything we have heard in the debate, leave us questions to answer, which I will put to the Minister. Why were only 1% of the unexpected deaths of people with learning disabilities at a trust such as Southern Health investigated? Why do only 1% of hate crimes against people with learning disabilities result in prosecutions? Parents from both campaigns for better safeguarding of people with learning disabilities urge us to stop the Mental Capacity Act being used to distance those families and isolate people, particularly young people.

My hon. Friend spoke powerfully of the need to give families of adult children with learning disabilities much clearer and increased rights over their adult child’s welfare. She highlighted well the horrific events that can occur when families do not remain part of the decision-making process. I will repeat, because they are important, the two recommendations of Lee Irving’s family. The first is that the move from children’s to adults’ services be better managed, to ensure a smoother transition without loss of support, and that services consider the capacity, rather than the age, of the individual. That was clearly an important factor in the case of Lee Irving. Secondly—and very importantly, because this matters to many families—they recommend that families remain part of the decision-making process in the case of vulnerable adults and are fully involved in and consulted on best interest and other decisions relating to family members.

In a dignified and passionate speech, my hon. Friend also argued convincingly of the need to introduce a new offence of disability hate crime, to send a clear message that what happened to Lee Irving will not be tolerated in 21st-century Britain. It is unusual to have such a small debate, but it has been worth while to lay out that
case and make other points. We must continue to have an informed debate about the status of adults with learning disabilities as full citizens, but more important than anything is that we should listen to them and their families. We should remember the deeply disturbing words of Lee’s mother, Bev:

“nobody listened to me. If I had been listened to, then my son would still have been alive now.”

3.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I join everyone else in paying tribute to the dignified and passionate way in which the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) outlined her case. It is truly heartbreaking. Lee’s mother is watching today. She put her trust in the institutions of the state to care for her son, and we failed her. It should never have happened, and for that I am truly, truly sorry. I give the hon. Lady and Bev my commitment that I will take lessons from this. I hope the hon. Lady will act as my conscience in ensuring that I do so. The issues highlighted across the Chamber today need to be acted upon, to ensure that we do our best by all our constituents.

I was struck by the way that the hon. Lady talked more generally about people with learning disabilities. It is, frankly, the reason we all get involved in politics—we get involved in politics when we see the state failing and to make sure we do the best for everyone in society and for the people we can see being failed. I do not think that any group is failed more than people with learning disabilities. They have potential and the ability to live independently, but all too often they have been parted. My hon. Friend the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) outlined examples of where, with some support, people with learning disabilities can lead very productive lives, but it requires support and investment. Sadly, that is not always forthcoming, and without it, they are very vulnerable, as this tragic case all too clearly illustrates. We owe it to them and to ourselves, in order to make the best of society, to do all we can to help people with learning disabilities to live independent lives.

We need to do more to tackle the whole issue of prejudice. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North said she has been very persistent in trying to secure this debate, but perhaps it is fitting that the debate is happening in the middle of National Hate Crime Awareness Week. That is the perfect backdrop to that. In this case, Lee was obviously being exploited outside my bailiwick, but I will make a few observations, in so far as I can without treading on other Departments’ toes. As she said, the judge concluded that hate was not a factor in the motivation behind the crime. That is a matter for the courts, and it is for them to interpret, but I come back to the issue of prejudice. That case throws up a number of issues that we all need to be more vigilant about. We know that people with learning disabilities are very vulnerable to bad people, and bad people will find vulnerable people to prey on. I am aware that young women with learning disabilities are often preyed upon sexually, which is a real hidden issue that we need to think about. There is also the whole issue of modern slavery. People with learning disabilities are often subject to that. In this case, Lee was obviously being exploited financially by the people who murdered him.

Barbara Keeley: I did not manage to raise the very important point that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) raised about the fact that Lee Irving was labelled as difficult to help and classed as an adult who could choose a lifestyle, with such tragic results. That has echoes of other forms of abuse because, as my hon. Friend so clearly pointed out to us, his intellectual skills and reasoning were at 0.2% of those of adults of his age. Why were agencies saying that he could choose that awful lifestyle, which ended up having such a tragic result?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. As she says, we have seen that in other cases of abuse. We can look at Rotherham and how the agencies behaved there. It is almost as if there is a view that, “He’s a bad ‘un; he doesn’t deserve protection.” That is absolutely not the case. We need to be thinking about the person in a very person-centred way. It was very clear that Lee had a learning disability and did not have the capacity to act as an adult, yet he was treated as one. That is one of the real lessons of this case.
With specific regard to the requests of the family, the whole area of transition is certainly of concern to me. We see this issue in relation not just to learning disabilities, but to mental health. In both cases, families are often completely unable to influence support or care for their loved one; they are utterly powerless because they are in the control of institutions. We need to be learning the very clear lessons there.

We need to raise awareness of hate crime against people with disabilities. Too often, we look at hate crime through the prisms of race and gender. To be honest, we look at hate crime through those prisms because it is the victim of a hate crime who will raise it as such and, frankly, people with disabilities are in less of a position to do so. That said, things are getting better. As I said, it is early days for the offence and prosecution of hate crime, but I am told that in the past year the police have recorded an additional 5,558 disability hate crimes; the number is up by 53%. That suggests that people are more motivated or able to report hate crime, but it may be that there is a significant increase in hate crime as well. It is incumbent on the Government to find a way of monitoring that, so that we can understand whether this is a growing problem or whether there is just more success in terms of the reporting of the crime. We should not confuse the two.

Catherine McKinnell: I appreciate the response that the Minister has given, but the increase in reporting of hate crime is very concerning. There are potentially two issues here. One is that people are more motivated or able to report hate crime, but it may be that there is a significant increase in hate crime as well. It is incumbent on the Government to find a way of monitoring that, so that we can understand whether this is a growing problem or whether there is just more success in terms of the reporting of the crime. We should not confuse the two.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is a fair point. Data is everything, and as time progresses, we will build up more meaningful data, but certainly if crimes are being reported, they are more likely to be prosecuted. Even if the behaviour has been hidden, or if it is on the rise, at least prosecution can happen, but we need to tackle the behaviour first and foremost, to be frank. Prevention is always better than cure.

Under the hate crime action plan launched in July 2016, we committed to providing funding to community-led projects aimed at tackling hate crime. In the first year of the scheme, we funded nine projects across England and Wales covering all types of hate crime. We funded a project in Carlisle involving Mencap. It was to develop an education resource to raise awareness of disability hate crime and how to report it. The great thing about that was that it was created by people with learning disabilities for people with learning disabilities, so it was enabling and empowering the victims. I am advised that three of the projects for the second year of the programme will focus on tackling disability hate crime, but clearly there is more to do.

On 21 August 2017, the Crown Prosecution Service published revised public statements and legal guidance for all strands of hate crime, as well as a support guide for disabled victims and witnesses. One of the most telling things about the speech by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North was that it was in the interaction with the criminal justice system that perhaps the most decisive intervention to support Lee could have occurred. Again, we can do more. The Solicitor General is well aware of this matter and, I am sure, is already having discussions with the legal agencies about how we can spread good practice and perhaps look at guidance.

Safeguarding was obviously the real failing in this case. Clearly, we need a system that protects those at risk and acts on issues effectively; that did not happen in this case. As we have heard, once someone becomes an adult, it is very important that it has regard to their feelings and wishes, but the whole issue of mental capacity needs to be determined. In the Care Act 2014, there is a clear legal framework for safeguarding, which gives clear instruction on the responsibilities of local authorities and the rights of adults, but it is also important to involve their families and loved ones as and when necessary. Again, that is a very troubling aspect of this case.

We need to do better. We need to make clear what is expected of the various agencies under the Care Act. We are pursuing Making Safeguarding Personal, which is a sector-led improvement programme that aims to reinforce the placing of the individual at the centre of safeguarding. We are also working with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services to improve that.

To come back to the issue of the criminal justice system, that was a missed opportunity to give Lee support. During the past two years, we have been working very hard to expand liaison and diversion services. It has been a good news story: more than 71,000 vulnerable adults have been taken out of the criminal justice system and instead put on an integrated health and justice pathway, helping them into health services and away from custody where appropriate. I can assure the hon. Lady that that is still a key part of how we will approach this issue. In fact, I met the team doing that work just last week.

To address the specific recommendations made by the family, the transition from children’s to adults’ services is clearly key. That is where things go wrong; we need to ensure that it is joined up. I always say that if we have a weak link in a chain, we can usually get over that, but if we have a succession of them, that is when things go terribly wrong. As the hon. Lady outlined, there were probably half a dozen in this case.

We are determined that young people with learning disabilities will be properly prepared for adulthood. We are looking at four specific areas: employment, good health, independent living and community inclusion. From the way the hon. Lady articulated Lee’s circumstances, I do not think he could have been judged to be meeting all four of those criteria by any stretch of the imagination, so we must ensure that the support network is in place to help to steer individuals through that, for as long as it takes. It can take a number of years, but the end goal is a good one if we are prepared to make that investment. If people are not ready, they must have support to prevent them from being exploited by those who would exploit people who are vulnerable.

Many people think that the Mental Capacity Act 2005 is very complex legislation, and clearly in this case not everyone knew their obligations under it. There was not a clear understanding of how far the family should have been involved when Lee’s mental capacity was clearly not that of an adult. We want to do a lot more work on educating people in this space. In 2015 we established,
with the Ministry of Justice, the National Mental Capacity Forum, specifically to develop those messages and good practice across the sector.

We also have to look at deprivation of liberty safeguards. The Law Commission has recently published its report on mental capacity and deprivation of liberty, and I welcome the observations of the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North in the light of this case. Like all Law Commission reports, it is a very well-thought-out piece of work. It has had lots of investigation and engagement with stakeholders. We need to make sure that the law is proportionate in respecting people’s liberties, but can also be used to protect the vulnerable. That is clearly the test that we will apply.

We have heard that Lee struggled to navigate the system and that agencies did not work well to support him. Another important tool that will perhaps avoid cases like Lee’s in future is having a named social worker who owns the individual and their needs, and makes sure that those have been satisfied. I think that would make a big difference. We have the named social worker pilot scheme so that more people can have that personalised care and support. They can hold every agency responsible under care plans and be really person-centred, recognising that this is an individual with his own personality, needs and circumstances. That is a very important piece of work. It is our response to the 2015 consultation, “No voice unheard, no right ignored”, which sought views on strengthening the rights of people with learning disabilities, autism and mental health conditions, to enable them to live more independently.

The hon. Lady raised the case of Southern Health and Connor Sparrowhawk. I think we agree that sunlight is the best disinfectant, so all NHS trusts are now required to publish estimates of how many deaths they could have avoided had they been better. That includes the deaths of people with a learning disability. From June next year, trusts must also publish evidence of learning improvements that happen as a result of those data. We expect that the leaders of trusts should show some real accountability and leadership in how they deal with their duties under that requirement.

I want to give the hon. Lady plenty of time to speak at the end, because this is clearly a very important subject for her, but I will quickly add that one of the most important things we need to get right in supporting those with learning disabilities is to invest in good quality supported housing. That is central to encouraging independent living and to having the infrastructure in place to protect them from any potential exploitation.

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of costs and challenges. It is to be celebrated that people with learning disabilities are living longer—for a long time they were dying prematurely. That is a massive improvement in justice, but it does bring with it cash challenges, and obviously we are facing cash challenges across the sector. I wish that was easy to fix. It is not, but it is at the top of my in-tray, as I am sure both she and the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) will understand, and we are very keen to address it. On the specific issue of sleep-ins, which I know Mencap is very worried about, we are actively involved in discussions about how we can support the sector to deal with that.

To conclude, what happened to Lee was not the result of a single cause. There were a number of failings, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North articulately set out. I think there are real challenges: how the criminal justice system understands people with a learning disability, how all the agencies can work more effectively together and how we can provide support for people with a learning disability, so that we not only support, but protect them. We are taking action at a national level to address those. The permanent secretary at the Department of Health is about to convene a cross-departmental roundtable to look at how we can deal with this across Government.

I can give the hon. Lady my assurance that people with learning disabilities are a key priority of mine, and I look forward to making sure that we do not have to have a debate like this in future.

3.54 pm

Catherine McKinnell: I am pleased to have been able to put the details of Lee Irving’s case on the parliamentary record, for his family and in the hope that some good can come out of this horrendous tragedy. Unfortunately, after seven years of representing the people in Newcastle North, I have not yet succeeded in growing a cold heart or cynicism. I wanted to remain composed in order to make the strongest case possible on behalf of Lee Irving and his family, but the sheer inhumanity of what happened to him shocked the local community and everybody here. Only a cold-hearted person would not be moved by what happened. There is not only upset, but anger and frustration on my part, that the system—our system—let them down so badly.

I thank hon. Members for their powerful and constructive contributions to the debate today—the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell) and for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), and both the SNP and Labour Front Benchers, but in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for her timely intervention. I thank the Minister for a very sincere and encouraging response. That the Minister for disabled people has been present for this debate, and that the Government are listening so intently, will mean a lot to Lee’s family and anybody following these proceedings.

As well as listening, we need to make sure that the lessons that can be learnt from this case are learnt, as Lee’s family have reasonably requested. I understand what the Minister said about the funding situation, but I could not miss this opportunity, ahead of the Budget next week, to make that case for funding for local authorities, to make sure that we protect and safeguard the most vulnerable in our society. That is to make sure that our local authorities have the funding to put in place some of the measures that the Minister has outlined, because it cannot be done on the cheap. I appreciate that there is also a lot we can do on the funding issues, so I will continue, as invited, to work with the Government, the Department of Health, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government, to make sure that something good can come out of this horrific tragedy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered supporting and safeguarding adults with learning disabilities.
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sentencing in cases of dangerous driving involving death.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your wise chairmanship as ever, Mr Hollobone. As hon. Members and the Minister will know, this debate is timely, given the publication on 16 October of the response to the Government’s consultation on maximum sentences for particular driving offences. Our debate today is inevitably and rightly informed by the changes that the Government announced yesterday, but like many other Members, I sought this debate in response to a case in my constituency in which the perpetrator was convicted after pleading guilty to causing death by dangerous driving. As a former Minister, I understand and sympathise with the fact that the Minister will not be able to comment on individual cases, but my aim is to use this tragic case as an example to question whether the current sentencing regime is fit for purpose, to discuss some of the Government’s proposals and changes, and to discuss how this case and ones like it need to lead to a change in policy.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I am sure that many will know of the sad case of four-year-old Violet-Grace Youens, who was killed this year and whose grandmother was left seriously injured when they were returning from their nursery. A stolen car crashed into them at 80 miles per hour in a 30 mph zone in St Helens. Two young men were in the car, one driving and one not. One of them ran past dying Violet-Grace laughing, making his getaway. The other posted a video from his prison cell celebrating his birthday; it depicts drug-taking and misbehaviour in prison. One will understand why Violet-Grace’s parents are deeply distressed and have no faith in our justice system. The boy who was celebrating his birthday received a 10-day extension to his sentence for posting the video. I have read these proposals with interest and welcome them, but please consider those who may not have been on drugs and drink at the time.

Kevin Brennan: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Obviously, that is a horrendous case and a great deal needs to be done on our prisons policy. It is not for us to debate that here today, but there is much to be done to improve the current state of affairs in our prisons, and I sympathise with her constituents and their families.

I want to talk about Sophie Taylor, a 22-year-old constituent of mine; she was a young woman in the prime of her life, with much to look forward to. She was described by her distraught mother, Jackie, as a loving and caring individual. I pay tribute to Jackie for somehow finding the strength to come and talk to me about the case, and to talk to the media about her horrific loss and her subsequent experience of the criminal justice and court system.

During the early hours of the morning of 22 August 2016, Sophie and her friend, Joshua Deguara, were chased through the streets of Cardiff by her ex-boyfriend, Michael Wheeler, and another driver. I will not comment on the case of the second driver, because elements of that case might still be sub judice, but I will focus on the actions and sentencing of Michael Wheeler, who entered a guilty plea and whose case is not subject to appeal.

During the chase, Sophie called 999 because she was scared and felt unsafe. She was on the phone, talking to an operator for 24 minutes. As that duration shows, the chase was a sustained and deliberate action by Mr Wheeler. During that time, his car reached speeds of up to 56 mph as he chased Sophie and Joshua into narrow residential streets. Then, he turned his car to the left into Sophie’s, causing her car to crash into a block of flats. The collision caused Sophie a catastrophic brain injury, which led to her death. Joshua suffered life-changing injuries, including a brain bleed, a shattered pelvis and an injury to his leg that has since led to its amputation. News reports stated that Mr Wheeler drove away after the crash before parking nearby, where he was arrested.

The judge who heard the case at Cardiff Crown court described what happened that night as “nothing more than a pack chasing its prey”.

He added:

“You were trying to ram her off the road and you did”.

It is also worth noting that Sophie had made several reports to the police and visited the police station in the weeks leading up to her death about the problems she was experiencing with Mr Wheeler. The chase was an act of decisive, prolonged and co-ordinated aggression, and in my view, one which should have led to an even more serious charge than causing death by dangerous driving, but the judge was clear, saying “you were consumed by a self-righteous and jealous rage, chasing her down to frighten her and teach her a lesson”.

We can only imagine Sophie’s family’s loss and the stress and torment that they have endured throughout the legal process. As I said, I met her mother, Jackie. Understandably, she is absolutely devastated by what happened, but she is equally determined to do what she can to prevent other families having to go through what her family has suffered.

As I said, I completely understand that the Minister cannot comment on individual cases. However, the details of the case that I have outlined are extremely pertinent in discussing the sentencing of cases of death by dangerous driving.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Members might know of an incident that happened in Penge last year, when two of my constituents, Makayah McDermott—a 10-year old boy and aspiring young actor—and his aunt, Rozanne Cooper, were killed when a stolen vehicle was travelling at 55 miles per hour in a residential area just opposite a playground. That case is particularly close to my heart because I was at school with the mother of the boy and his aunt, both of whom died. Does my hon. Friend agree that the disparity between sentences for manslaughter and sentences for death by dangerous driving has long been unjust?

Kevin Brennan: Yes I do, as a matter of fact, and I extend my sympathies to my hon. Friend and her constituents in relation to that tragic case. The case I will try to develop in my argument is that it is not enough just to get parity of sentence. We need to look at...
what sentences are being handed out and why, and whether justice is being served by the system, whatever ultimate maximum tariff the Government decide is appropriate for this offence.

The details of this case are pertinent. As hon. Members know, the maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving has been raised in recent years to 14 years in custody. I note that in its guidelines, the Sentencing Council characterises a level 1 conviction for causing death by dangerous driving as

“a deliberate decision to ignore (or a flagrant disregard for) the rules of the road and an apparent disregard for the great danger being caused to others.”

Given that Sophie was deliberately and persistently chased through the streets of Cardiff and forced off the road in a way that ultimately led to her death, it seems to me that a level 1 sentence would have to apply in this case. However, although the starting point for a level 1 conviction is eight years in custody, Wheeler was sentenced to seven and a half years, which is just over half the maximum sentence available. My constituent Jackie Taylor’s understanding is that the guidelines available to the judge did not allow for the maximum sentence to be given, despite the obvious aggressive and aggravating factors in this particular case.

The Justice Secretary said in reply to a letter that I sent to him about this case that the courts must follow sentencing guidelines

“unless it is not in the interest of justice to do so”.

That leads to an obvious question: how could it be in the interests of justice to opt for a shorter sentence in a case such as the one that I have outlined? The sentence following Sophie Taylor’s death poses questions about the current frequency and circumstances of use of the maximum sentence that are particularly timely, given the Government’s announcement that they intend to increase the maximum sentence from 14 years to life in cases of death by dangerous driving.

The first issue is how often the maximum sentence is used. In my previous correspondence on the matter with the Justice Secretary, I asked how many maximum sentences for causing death by dangerous driving had been handed out in recent years. I noted that the Government press release yesterday containing the announcement on the maximum sentence said that 157 people were sentenced in 2016 for causing death by dangerous driving. In his response to the question I asked in my letter, the Justice Secretary—it is not like him not to respond to my direct question—simply said that the maximum sentence was rarely used. When the Minister responds, can he give us that figure? I looked carefully at the Government’s press release to see whether it was there, but it was not.

I say gently to him that such sensitive matters should be carefully proofread. The final point of the notes to editors in the press release says:

“The government will give further consideration to increasing minimum driving bans for those convicted of causing serious death.”

I know that that is an error, but an error so crass is not really acceptable in something so sensitive.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is getting to the fundamental point. This week, Merseyside Road Safety Partnership announced a strategy to reduce road deaths dramatically by 2020, but I am sure he will agree that preventive measures are useful and good only if those who cause death by dangerous driving know that they will be dealt with harshly by the law.

Kevin Brennan: Justice should be served by the right sentence being given for the offence. There should also be an anticipation that offenders are likely to be caught and justice served upon them. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: if that is not clear, such offences will continue.

I hope that the Minister can at least give us that figure. The public are entitled to know. When my constituent, Jackie Taylor, read the Justice Secretary’s response, she said:

“I note that the right hon. David Lidington, CBE, MP mentions about the government in consultation on driving offences and penalties relating to causing death and serious injury, possibly increasing to life imprisonment. This will only deem as a deterrent, not deal with the offence committed. If 14 years has never been passed down to any individual for this charge, why would life imprisonment ever be used? If the Sentencing Council control what the judges can serve, and are recommending low guidelines in the criteria that the judges work with, then what difference would it make if it’s life?”

That is a reasonable question for my constituent, as a victim of this crime, to pose to the Government. I hope that the Minister can deal with it in his response to this debate.

Obviously, I am interested in how often the maximum sentence is given, as the Government’s consultation showed that 70% of respondents did not feel that the current maximum of 14 years was long enough. The Minister will understand that if the sentence of 14 years is hardly ever used, it raises the question how a new increased maximum would be used and why it was found to be necessary. Have the Government estimated how often they estimate the new maximum sentence is likely to be given, based on current experience and their consultation? Likewise, what effect does he think the new maximum will have on the average sentence for causing death by dangerous driving? If there is no answer to those questions, the obvious next question is what is the point of the proposed change.

In 2015, with a maximum sentence of 14 years, the average custodial sentence length was 57.1 months. Is it projected, as the Government anticipated, that that will increase in line with the new maximum? The second issue is the circumstances in which the maximum penalty is used. Maximum sentences and sentences of a similarly lengthy duration are rightly reserved for the most heinous crimes. I have outlined the horrible circumstances of my constituent’s death. Given that Wheeler was sentenced to just over half the maximum time in custody, the victim’s mother’s question is what someone would have to do for the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving to be available, if it was not available in this case. How will that change as the Government change the maximum sentence?

As I mentioned, my constituent understands that the sentencing guidelines prevented the judge from giving Wheeler the maximum sentence; indeed, it was reduced by six months from the eight-year starting point. Sophie’s mother is concerned about how the sentencing guidelines operate. What assessment has the Minister made of how accountable the Sentencing Council is? I know that it is independent, but it should still be accountable for how it draws up its guidelines.
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Brennan: I will give way briefly, but I want to give the Minister a chance to respond.

Alex Chalk: The Sentencing Council does important and valuable work, but does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that in some of its guidelines—for the sake of argument, let us say assault occasioning actual bodily harm, for which the maximum is five years—the range that the Sentencing Council imposes for the most heinous offences stops well short of the maximum, effectively sending a steer to the judges that says, “Don’t ever sentence for the maximum”? Does he agree that that is a concern?

Kevin Brennan: I do, and I think that there are similar concerns in relation to the offence of causing death by dangerous driving. I do not advocate not having proper guidelines—we want consistency in sentencing—but it sometimes seems to victims that the sentence they are told the perpetrator is likely to get is a bit of a fiction, and that the tariff actually served is nothing like the maximum, even in a case such as the one I have discussed, in which there are horrific aggravating factors. Can the Minister address the questions posed by Sophie Taylor’s case about the frequency and circumstances in which a maximum sentence is given?

I want to make it clear that this is not about revenge; it is about justice. In the case that I am discussing, sentencing guidelines led to an outcome that outraged not only the victims’ families but the wider community. The Government need to be clearer about what they are doing to deter such crime. Knowing that a life sentence is a real possibility would be a start, as would increasing the likelihood of getting caught by funding the police properly; that is a vital part of it. The prospect that sentences could be increased on appeal when judges are too lenient is also important. I understand that out of 713 such requests in recent years, 136 have resulted in longer sentences, but not one has been for the offence of causing death by dangerous driving.

Sophie Taylor’s death was a horrible tragedy. Nothing will relieve her family’s loss. However, the perception that justice was not done because the maximum sentence is unreachable adds another burden for them to bear.

4.18 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): It is a great pleasure, as ever, to speak under your doughty chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I begin in the customary manner by congratulating the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on securing this debate on sentencing for causing death by dangerous driving offences. I know that many colleagues here will have dealt with tragic cases in their constituencies; we have heard, movingly, of a couple of them. Those who have had that misfortune will know that reckless driving ruins lives and devastates families, whether the culprit is racing, talking on a mobile phone or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

The hon. Gentleman has championed this cause tenaciously since the tragic case in the summer of 2016 in which Michael Wheeler and Melissa Pesticcio started a car chase that, as he described, left Sophie Taylor dead and her passenger Joshua Deguara seriously injured. I extend my deepest sympathies to Sophie’s mother Jackie, whom the hon. Member for Cardiff West described, and to Sophie’s wider family and friends. I cannot begin to imagine their loss. The technical and legal changes that we are making will not bring her back, but these reforms must try to deliver some reassurance and solace, through a greater sense that justice is being done. I also pay tribute to Joshua Deguara and his family, whose suffering has been immense. The case highlights the need for reform.

Thomas Crowther, QC, the Cardiff Crown court judge in the case of Sophie Taylor, said that “that shattering of two families was completely avoidable. It was caused by...the self-righteous and jealous rage” of the defendants, who were “chasing her down to frighten her and teach her a lesson”.

The court sentenced Michael Wheeler to seven and a half years in prison and Melissa Pesticcio to six and a half years.

Such cases are far too common. The reforms that we have announced this week will come too late for the families of Kris Jarvis, John Morland and James Gilbey, to name the victims of just a few of the tragedies that have struck me as I have worked on proposals for reform. The hon. Members for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) gave moving accounts of tragedies in their constituencies; I pay tribute to them and extend my sympathies and condolences to the families. I appreciate the frustration and anguish that they must feel. I met Major Gilbey, James’s father, last week. It is right to pay tribute to his courage and strength, and to all the families who have campaigned for a change in the law.

Numerous colleagues across the House have also raised cases with me and my predecessors at the Ministry of Justice.

We recognise that the law has too often prevented judges from handing down sufficiently long sentences for the very worst cases of dangerous driving, bearing in mind the severity of the harm and the anguish of the victims’ families. We have looked at the evidence, and now is the time to change the law. Although we cannot bring back lost loved ones, we can make sure that justice is done. Yesterday, we published our response to the consultation on driving offences and penalties relating to causing death and serious injury. The consultation, which closed earlier this year, received more than 9,000 submissions with different views on the offences and penalties. That shows the widespread public interest in reform and the concern about how the law has operated.

Based on the evidence, we propose three specific changes to the law. I hope the hon. Member for Cardiff West will welcome them, but I will also try to address his specific points. Even more importantly, I hope the changes will give the victims and the wider public a stronger sense that justice is being done. All three proposals received overwhelming support in the consultation.

First, we propose to increase the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years to life imprisonment. We want the courts to have additional powers to deal with the most serious cases in which life is lost. In 2016, the average sentence for causing death by dangerous driving was five years. In the last two
years, three sentences of longer than 10 years have been imposed. That makes the case that those sentences are not attracting the level of seriousness that the hon. Member for Cardiff West and the Government think is due.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman, the point of the change is to send an unequivocal, crystal-clear message to the courts that they can and should impose a higher sentence—a life sentence—for the very worst cases. It is for the Sentencing Council to decide whether new guidelines are needed on this sentence or on any of the others that I will mention. He is right to mention that the ULS—unduly lenient sentences—scheme applies to those cases and that they will therefore be referred to the Court of Appeal if the Attorney General so decides. He rightly acknowledges that as politicians, we cannot and should not interfere with individual decision making, as opposed to the sentencing framework that applies in such cases.

In very serious cases in which there are multiple victims, in which the offender has previous convictions or in which their behaviour is particularly reckless and culpable—as in some of the cases described by the hon. Members for St Helens South and Whiston and for Lewisham West and Penge—offenders will face a maximum life sentence. The effect of that change is twofold. Offenders who receive a life sentence will serve a minimum period in prison and will be released only when the Parole Board considers it safe. For offenders who do not merit a life sentence, the court will have the power to impose a determinate sentence of any length. That will empower the courts to reflect the full severity of the worst offending and its devastating impact on victims and their families.

Alex Chalk: The Minister speaks about sending a powerful message. A powerful message is sent to the Sentencing Council too. Does he agree that for offences such as stalking, for which the maximum sentence has been doubled, that message has been reflected to a large extent in the Sentencing Council’s most recently published guidelines?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right. I remember his tenacious campaign on that subject from my early days as a Justice Minister. As well as empowering the courts, the change sends a message that will have an effect, right through the system, on the raw power available to a sentencing court. It will have a knock-on effect on the Sentencing Council and its ability to assess and consider whether further guidelines need to be provided. At the appeal level, there is also the ULS scheme.

In the time available, I will address the other key proposals. The second proposal is to raise the maximum penalty for the separate offence of causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs. We recognise that although the driving in such cases may not amount to dangerous driving, the overall seriousness of the offence is the same, because of the combination of careless driving and the irresponsible decision to get behind the wheel under the influence of drink or drugs. Again, for the worst cases, we propose that the maximum sentence be life imprisonment.

Our third proposal will close a gap in the law. At the moment, if a driver who is driving carelessly injures another road user, passenger or pedestrian, the maximum penalty is a fine, even if the incident results in the victim being left with serious, debilitating or permanent injuries. The case that particularly struck me was that of Sophie Wilkinson, who was left in a coma with a life-changing set of injuries after a horror crash in 2007. We need the criminal law to cover careless driving that results in such severe harm and injury, so we will introduce a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. That offence will carry a custodial penalty and will sit alongside the existing offence of causing serious injury by dangerous driving.

Those are the three key areas of reform that we plan to implement as soon as parliamentary time allows. We will incorporate any further changes that emerge from the review of cycling safety announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport last month, so that we have a consistent overarching framework for sentencing people who kill or cause serious injury on our roads. I am grateful for the time and effort that so many people, including the hon. Member for Cardiff West and the campaigning families, put into their responses to the consultation. No punishment in these cases can make up for the loss of a loved one, but we can make sure that justice is properly done.

Kevin Brennan: The Minister says that three sentences longer than 10 years have been imposed in the last couple of years, but he did not say that the maximum 14-year sentence had been used. I hope he wants to signal that that maximum sentence should be used more frequently.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As we develop these proposals, I look forward to working with him and other hon. Members across the House. It is the very least that the victims and their families deserve.

Question put and agreed to.
Devolved Powers in Scotland

4.30 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the use of devolved powers in Scotland.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to lead my first debate as a Member of Parliament.

Twenty years ago, I was in the minority. At the referendum in 1997, I campaigned against the establishment of a Scottish Parliament, not from party loyalty but from the starting point that any dilution of the Union could lead to its ending. I urged the people of Scotland to think twice and vote no. They did not; instead, they voted yes to a future with a devolved Parliament in Edinburgh.

However, I now realise that I was wrong. With the zeal of the convert, I have trodden my own road to Damascus and now I stand here today to extol the virtues of the Scottish Parliament and devolution. The Scottish Parliament has helped and is helping to create a better Scotland, and a more comfortable and confident Union, too; but more than that, I firmly believe that devolution is a principle worth arguing for. I am not talking about devolution in the sense of the establishment of a Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly, but about the concept of devolution. It is core to my credo that politics should be local and we should seek to localise decision making.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. This is an hour-long debate. Lots of Back Benchers have put in to speak. The time limit is already looking like it will be three minutes; that time limit will go down if there are interventions. I say now that if a Member intervenes, they will not catch my eye to be called to make a speech.

Stephen Kerr: I give way to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil).

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. As he might know, we have a problem on the west coast of Scotland, because we need fishermen from non-European economic area countries. Westminster is stopping that, in contrast to Switzerland, for example, where half the visas are controlled by Bern and the other half by the 26 cantons. Does he not think that it is time for Westminster to loosen its iron grip and allow fishing boats on the west of Scotland, and indeed in Northern Ireland, to fish?

Stephen Kerr: I do not necessarily recognise the nature of the problem that the hon. Gentleman is describing and I will come on to talk about the relationship that should exist between the Parliaments of this island.

As I was saying, Edinburgh is not the end of the road; Holyrood should just be the beginning. Politics, indeed, should be local. However, that is not Scotland’s story, nor has it been for the last 20 years of our Scottish Parliament. Instead of treating devolution as a process of bringing power to the people, first the Scottish Executive and then the Scottish Government have consolidated power in their offices in Edinburgh.

There has been a power grab in Scotland, sucking power from communities and taking power from the many into the hands of the few. Decisions taken around the Cabinet table in Bute House are remote and removed from the daily lives of the people of Scotland. They often run roughshod over the views of the public, and are apparently unheeding to and uncaring about the difficulties that communities face.

I am, however, full of hope that that situation can be addressed by the simple adoption of the principles of devolution by the Scottish Nationalist Government in Edinburgh. Since the passage of the Scotland Act 2016, we now have a powerhouse Parliament. It should not be forgotten that it was a Conservative Government who delivered those powers, in fulfilment of the vow made by David Cameron and, as Scottish Conservatives, we are proud to have done that. It is David Cameron’s proud legacy. Powers over equalities, gaming machines, income tax, railway policing, welfare, quarrying, air passenger duty, consumer advocacy and advice, the Crown Estate, elections and employment programmes—all these are in addition to the powers of general competence that the Scottish Government already enjoy, and there are more powers on their way.

The powers at the disposal of the Scottish Parliament have the potential to make a real difference to the lives of the people of Scotland. The Scottish Parliament can develop the economy, create specific help for people who need welfare and choose to vary taxation. I am by no means a fan of the idea of raising taxes, but I believe that services must be paid for and it should be for local councils and the Scottish Government to set an appropriate level of tax to pay for those services. With all those powers and the ability to tax and borrow more than ever before, the Scottish Parliament is well placed to get to work to solve our country’s problems and to work for Scotland’s betterment. What a shame that we still have so much confusion and grievance being shown.

Let me give an example of that. One of the Members of the Scottish Parliament made a statement just last month calling on Westminster to do something about the number of fixed odds betting machines, with the grievance about the lack of power hanging in the air, but of course that power was devolved in May 2016. It is possible that that statement was a simple mistake brought about by the confusing nature of the legislation, but it also misled members of the public about who is responsible. Instead of using such an important issue as a political ping-pong ball battered over Hadrian’s Wall, would it not be better if we approached such issues as a way of creating partnerships between different levels of Government, in order to achieve something?

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for giving us the opportunity to talk a bit about why the Scottish National party Government are still polling very highly and why the Tories have moved back into third place in Scotland. However, on the subject of fixed odds betting terminals, I represent a constituency that is littered with betting shops, as a result of the liberalisation of the Gambling Act 2005. Does he recognise that most of those shops are covered by previous legislation and that only new terminals are dealt with differently?
Stephen Kerr: The reality is that the power to legislate in this area belongs with the Scottish Parliament.

As I have said, instead of treating such issues as political ping-pong balls, where there are elements reserved for Westminster, elements that are at Holyrood level and elements that require the intervention of a local authority, would it not be better if we worked together? Problems can be passed between Holyrood and Westminster without resolution, or we can take responsibility as lawmakers to work together for a solution. I believe in creating partnerships to achieve things, rather than issuing press releases as a display of political virility. Activity and achievement are not the same thing in politics. There is much to do in Scotland.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing his first debate in this Chamber and on his election. He talks about working together, so was he as astonished as I was when the Scottish Nationalist Government in Edinburgh voted against lifting the public sector pay cap in Scotland, while SNP Members here voted to lift it in Westminster? If so, could the UK and Scottish Governments work together to lift the public sector pay cap?

Stephen Kerr: Contradictions between what the SNP does in the Scottish Parliament and what it says here are quite common.

The Scottish Parliament has powers to do so much good, but some of those powers remain unused. The tax-raising powers that the Scottish Parliament has had since its inception, which were agreed to at the referendum in 1997, remain in their box, unused. I do not believe in higher taxes, but there have been a few parties that might have some small representation in the Scottish Parliament that do. The SNP has the full right to use those powers, so when we hear talk decrying the funding settlement, we should remember that the Scottish Government have the power to vary the tax rate and to raise their own money.

Newer powers, on speed limits and air passenger duty, also remain unused, but we will see what the future holds in respect of those powers. All these powers, so when we hear talk decrying the funding settlement, we should remember that the Scottish Government have the power to vary the tax rate and to raise their own money.

Just because we have our own powerhouse Parliament in Edinburgh does not mean that our Parliament in London should be less of a force for good in Scotland. The UK Parliament is still as much a Scottish Parliament as it has been since the Act of Union in 1707. Scotland is one land with two Parliaments. We deserve our voice to be heard here and we deserve our Government—the UK Government—to work in our interests. Action taken by the Exchequer to work with the oil industry, to ensure that the full force of the UK economy can come to the assistance of the regional economy of Aberdeen, is an example of our working together as a United Kingdom.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): On 3 October the Scottish Government announced an absolute ban on fracking in Scotland. In 1969—the year I was born—the main discovery of oil was made in the North sea. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Scottish National party were in power now, it would ban the exploration of oil in the North sea, based on quasi-science?

Stephen Kerr: Indeed, the SNP is more defined by what it is against than what it is for, in most instances. I say to the Minister that it is vital that the UK Government do not devolve and forget. Betterment will come—in so many ways—only when different levels of government work together in co-operation. That is why a positive relationship between all levels of government—Edinburgh, Westminster and local government—is imperative. Such a relationship should be built on respect, and it should not matter whether someone is a local councillor, a Member of the Scottish Parliament or a Member of this Parliament. We are all unified in our goal of making Scotland a better place. We might have different approaches, but I believe that people who enter politics do so out of a genuine belief, either in a cause or in the value of public service or, as is often the case, in both. That respect must run both ways, and political parties have a fundamental responsibility to embody the principle of respect, as we all know what happens when it breaks down.

In Stirling we have a city deal, which, to work, requires the agreement of the local authority, the Scottish Government and the UK Government. The UK Government have made a significant commitment to the city region deal and the local authority is already spending money on projects. The Scottish Government are coming to the table, but there is a nagging feeling that Edinburgh is reticent about getting involved. I hope that changes soon and that we see movement, but it is part of a worrying trend. I will work with all levels of politicians, officials and businesses—to make the deal happen and to make it work.

On the other side, the UK Government are responsible for broadband policy in Scotland. [Interruption.] Listen, listen. That policy is being delivered through the Scottish Government. There is a contract set by the Scottish Government, targets set by the Scottish Government and a delivery body, within the Scottish Government. When new areas are released as being covered by broadband, SNP Ministers will be there getting their photos taken. Who can blame them? All politicians love to have their pictures taken. But then when questions are raised or there are negative stories, it all somehow, as if by magic, becomes a problem caused by Westminster neglect.

The Scottish Government—the SNP Government—tends towards grievance instead of fixing the issues. With fixed odds betting terminals, welfare rights or broadband, they prefer to focus on process. The reason the SNP exists is to build support for independence. Despite its being an overwhelmingly negative way of doing things, grievance is clearly how it likes to do them and, frankly, Scotland suffers because of that.

While the Scottish Government are distracted, education is slipping. The fact that international scoring puts us behind England should be a source of national embarrassment, yet the Scottish Government prefer to focus on independence. Business growth in Scotland in 2016 was the lowest for any part of the United Kingdom. The business community are crying out for a more joined-up approach to business support and reform of the business rates system. Despite that, the Scottish Government want to focus their time on fighting for more economic power, when they will not use the powers they already have at their disposal. Instead of focusing on the crime rate and the leadership crisis in the police
force. The SNP Scottish Government choose to put their time and attention into scrapping the British Transport police.

There is a clear pattern: the SNP puts process and stoking up grievance ahead of the good of the people of Scotland, and that is not what the powers of the Scottish Parliament are for, nor what people pay their taxes to support the Scottish Government for—nor is it to pay for ministerial limos, by the way, but that is a different story. And there are more process issues being stoked up by Brexit. Scotland’s most important markets are in England, Wales and Northern Ireland—one could call that the United Kingdom single market. We have been in a social union with those countries for 310 years. There is freedom of movement and a customs union, but the SNP would prefer powers to be handled by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels than by a Government elected by the people of the United Kingdom. I have always found that position to be confusing at best and disingenuous at worst.

We need a regulated, open market within the UK, so it remains vital that some of the regulations and frameworks are set at Westminster level. Equally, some of the powers that Europe now holds should sit logically in the devolved Governments of Cardiff and Edinburgh. Beyond that, the devolved Assemblies have a responsibility to consider which of those powers can be reasonably held at local authority level. Again, if we approach this in partnership for Scotland, the UK and Scottish Governments can really deliver on the benefits of Brexit, but if we focus on the process and on fomenting grievance, Scotland will be let down again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Kerr: I am closing. With an approach that respects the motives of politicians from all along the political spectrum and from different levels of government, the people of Scotland would be better served. Our Scottish Government—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kerr: I am going to close. Our Scottish Government have a wide range of powers that they can use for the good of Scotland—more powers delivered by a Conservative Government. Devolution, however, should be a process and the Scottish people are best served when decisions are made closest to where they live. We must push for more power to be delivered to town halls across Scotland. Clarity over where power sits and honesty about that is essential. Politicians should be problem solvers, working across government levels to achieve for their constituents, rather than throwing their hands up in the air and decrying their lack of power.

Throughout all this is my fundamental belief that by working together we can achieve so much more for Scotland. We need to stop arguing. —[Interruption]—Sorry, I correct myself: we need to keep arguing. —[Laughter]—about policy and ideas. That is part of our nature as Scots. If we get away from the grievances and use the powers of devolution, we can all be winners. That is the promise of the use of power by government, whether local, devolved or national. Scotland is a land with two Parliaments, but it is one land and it deserves to be governed not in conflict but in partnership.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate ends at 5.30 pm. Mr Kerr has three minutes to sum up at the end. The guideline limits for the Front-Bench speeches are five minutes for Mr Sheppard and the SNP, five minutes for Mr Sweeney and Her Majesty’s official Opposition, and 10 minutes for the Minister. That means that I have to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at seven minutes past five. There are 19 minutes between now and then, and there are nine Members seeking to speak, so to get you all in there will have to be a two-minute limit, starting from now. If there is a two-minute limit, all those Members will get to speak; if there are interventions, someone or some people will lose out.

4.48 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I must confess that when I saw the debate on the Order Paper I had very low expectations, and the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) matched every single one of them.

The hon. Member for Stirling talks about politics being local. What about the Trade Union Act 2016? In that Act, local authorities and the Scottish Parliament were denied an opportunity to deal with their workforces in the way they wanted to because a Westminster Government imposed restrictions on them. That is not grievance, it is a simple fact. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that politics should be local, the Government should devolve the Trade Union Act to the Scottish Parliament.

As for the public sector pay cap, it was very strange that not one Scottish Conservative contributed to, or was in, the debate on that a couple of weeks ago. They were absent. They boycotted the debate, and they were local. The treatment of workers is one of the key powers that we need to debate—whether it should be a power for the Scottish Parliament or for Westminster. The Scottish Parliament would not be treating workers in the way that the Westminster Parliament is by not taking action against companies exploiting employees.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: I am afraid I have only 30 seconds left, so I will not. I apologise.

Bill Grant: I will be quick as a flash: I was there and I spoke in the debate, so the hon. Gentleman is wrong.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman did not speak in the public sector pay cap debate, and Hansard will show that. He asked a question during the ministerial statement. He was not there for the debate.

I think there should be an honest debate about powers being devolved to the Scottish Parliament, and I hope we will see that in the rest of the debate.

4.50 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for bringing this incredibly important debate to Westminster Hall, and to you, Mr Hollobone, for kindly allowing me to speak.
In my constituency of Angus, one of the biggest challenges is delivering effective and efficient healthcare in such a rural community. While the Scottish Parliament should in theory have the ability to better understand local needs, with this SNP Government, that unfortunately applies only to the central belt. For example, in my home town of Brechin—part of it falls into the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland—the health centre was staffed by six full-time GPs back in 2007. After 10 years of an SNP Government, that service has halved. In addition to the difficulty now faced by residents in simply securing a GP appointment—never mind mind continuity with the same GP—other services that should be delivered locally to reduce demand on Dundee’s A&E department are being withdrawn or reviewed with no guarantees about their replacement.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirstene Hair: No, I am going to make some progress. Speaking on behalf of my constituents, I say quite simply that we are fed up of being hoodwinked by this SNP Government. They should stop pulling the wool over our eyes. We deserve honesty, clarity and an open dialogue on such vital services—not back-room discussions that the service users have no ability to influence effectively. As a result of the fall in the number of doctors, out-of-hours care services that should be delivered in the community have all but disappeared. Rural residents are being forced to travel up to 40 miles to Dundee or wait until the daytime services re-open.

It is not just general practice that has been badly hit by the SNP’s mismanagement of Scotland’s NHS; every aspect of healthcare is being threatened by a Government set on centralisation. Whether it is the sham consultation on the Mulberry mental health unit—the SNP MSP who claims to be fighting the case refused to turn up to the regional NHS meeting where that exact issue was at the top of the agenda—or whether it is the closure of Brechin Infirmary—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call Martin Whitfield.

4.52 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for securing this debate. To have power and not use it is a crime. For a Government to have power and to lie in abeyance for so long is to mistrust and ill-serve the people who voted for them.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Power unused is the approach of the Labour party in Scotland, which sent billions of pounds back to Westminster. They had money, and they did not use it for the good of Scotland. They handed it back.

Martin Whitfield: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, and I thank him for the extra time. Devolution under the Scotland Act 1998 created the Parliament that sat on 12 May 1999. The first Act passed was the Mental Health (Public Safety and Appeals) (Scotland) Act 1999, and it is interesting that we still talk about the need and desires for mental health services to this day.

From the formation of the Scottish Parliament we are now in a position where in a recent poll, 19% of people in Scotland seemed to indicate that they want devolved powers returned to Westminster. That is an appalling state of affairs. After this length of time, instead of an increasing number finding confidence and security in our Parliament in Scotland, one fifth of the population wants to go back to what they had.

I want to look at the powers in relation to one industry that concerns my constituency greatly, which is timber. Businesses north of the border can draw down from the apprenticeship levy if and only if they have an approved training provider. Businesses south of the border can draw down for the individual apprentices they have. In my constituency, we have a forestry business that can produce 10 million trees a year, but the number of apprentices within the industry is so small that there is no provider, so the businesses cannot draw down on the levy and they get no financial support.

Other industries in my constituency have apprenticeships that cross the border. The nuclear power station wants to send its apprentices around the whole fleet, and that causes problems, because it can draw down on the apprenticeship levy south of the border, but not north of the border. This debate is very timely, and the discussion needs to be across the border so as to facilitate the best interests of those in Scotland and of the United Kingdom and its economy across the board. Maybe it is time we stop screaming and shouting at each other and sit down and talk and act in the best interests of both Scotland and the United Kingdom.

4.55 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I am delighted to take part in today’s debate, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on initiating it. Devolution should have been a good thing for Scotland, bringing power and decision-making closer to the people. Holyrood has evolved to be one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world, and I for one welcome that process, but it does mean that the Scottish Government must face the reality of spending within their means. Every time the SNP objects to a reduction in public spending, they have a simple solution: increase taxes to pay for what it is promising.

Devolution does not and should not stop at Holyrood. What we have seen, particularly over the past 10 years, is an increasingly powerful Scottish Parliament refusing to hand over any powers to local authorities. In fact, the reverse has often been the case. The current SNP Administration in Holyrood have been one of the most centralising Governments in recent years. Most people in Scotland do not feel that decision making has been brought any closer to them.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Lamont: No, I have got only a short amount of time left. In many cases, decision making has moved from Westminster to Holyrood. Scotland has become one of the most centralised countries in the western world. The vast majority of economic decision-making powers are kept by the Scottish Government, and councils have been relegated to little more than service providers. Council oversight of policing has been all but destroyed
by the creation of Police Scotland. Local sheriff courts have been shut in Duns and Peebles, as have local police station counters. The Scottish Government meddle in hundreds of planning decisions each year, overturning council decisions half the time.

My final point is this: the Scottish Government constantly say that they want more devolution, but it is interesting to see what they do with that devolution when they get it. The answer is nothing. The Scottish Government have had the power to raise or lower income tax, but have chosen not to use that power. They have the power to compensate women who have been affected by the changes to pension age, but they choose to do nothing apart from complain about it. Most recently, after years of demanding control over welfare, what did the SNP do when it actually got those powers? It asked the Department for Work and Pensions to remain in charge of payments for three more years because they were not ready for the responsibility. Time and time again, the SNP is failing Scotland because it fails to use the powers it has available.

4.58 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank my comrade the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for calling this debate. I will be as brief as possible. I want to talk about where Scotland is today and about our future. Most importantly, I want to talk about how we can use our significant powers to make the lives of the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill and all those across Scotland better, healthier and happier.

My commitment to the Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is not a secret. I proudly campaigned for a no vote across Scotland during the referendum because I believed that the powers in the Scottish Parliament were sufficient to ensure that Scotland and her people were adequately and effectively represented and served while still being part of the United Kingdom. Our issue is about the use of the powers. Some people in Scotland, many of them on the Conservative side, say that Holyrood has too many powers. Those in the SNP, who have been in government for more than 10 years, say there are not enough. To both sides, I say, “Rubbish.” We have enough powers to do it, so please let us start focusing on the issues that affect our young people in their schools, on our hospital wards that are at breaking point, and on our transport system that needs investment and focus.

Several hon. Members rose—

Hugh Gaffney: I apologise for not giving way; I have only got two minutes.

We have the powers to change and improve the lives of people in Scotland. The current Government in Scotland are a one-trick pony and do not seem to want to focus on the issues facing my constituents. If there is no appetite to use the powers, then we look forward to Scotland electing a Labour Government that will use the powers—a Labour Government that will empower, enrich and serve our people. Scotland will use the powers—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.
and—yes, I accept—how it is used, but what Members have come here for this afternoon is essentially a stairheid rammy.

If hon. Members want to have a serious debate about how powers are used to combat poverty or better the lives of the people of Scotland, let us have that discussion. As to all the accusations about not getting on with the day job—I really do not think so. When their own leader in Scotland is about to embark on a celebrity version of “The Great British Bake Off”, I will take no lectures in how to govern.

I also say this: there is a Minister here. Why not tear him apart on the half a trillion pounds that the Government have just lost—wiped off the UK’s wealth? There is not a single piece of holding to account. They were elected to send a message; well what a message it is.

5.4 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): The SNP has been in power for a decade now and throughout its time in office, the approach to dealing with any issue has been that control from Edinburgh is inherently better. The SNP Administration under Nicola Sturgeon have been characterised by illiberal reforms such as the named person scheme, where the Government did not trust parents to the extent that they wanted to assign a state guardian, because state officials know better than parents. The Supreme Court was unanimous in declaring that the Scottish Government had exceeded their powers in making a law that gave unprecedented powers to officials to share sensitive, private information about children without the consent of their parents.

Across Scotland, we have seen the Big Brother centralisation of power to an unprecedented degree and it is deeply disturbing. We have seen the Scottish Government’s illiberal control-freakery in the area of education, where the SNP’s top-down, authoritarian, one-size-fits-all approach is failing Scotland’s children. Schools are falling down international rankings and a smaller percentage of the most deprived children are going to university in Scotland than in any other part of the UK. Furthermore, the SNP has cut 152,000 college places.

In health, ministerial control has been tightened over health boards. Subsequently, NHS waiting times are being missed. We have seen widespread staffing crises right across Scotland, in every region. Turning to Police Scotland, eight regional police forces were merged into one, with accountability to a board appointed by Scottish Ministers, while right here, under the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary, we saw local accountability with elected police and crime commissioners. The SNP has called for more devolution for Scotland, but is silent when it comes to devolution within Scotland.

5.6 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Eighteen years since the opening of the Scottish Parliament, it is right that we in this place—the place that passed the original Scotland Act 1998—consider the use of devolved powers, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for introducing this debate.

It is a fact that thanks to the actions of this Government, the Scottish Parliament is one of the most powerful devolved legislative Assemblies in the world, with powers over justice, education, health, transport, the environment, and now taxation and elements of social security. That is a good thing. However, for the people of my constituency, and indeed for the people of the wider north-east of Scotland, far from the renewing or revitalising experience promised in 1999, the reality of devolution has been cuts, tax rises and the perception of a central-belt bias in all decision making.

Let us just look at what has happened: sheriff courts closed; the Grampian police gone; motorway improvements in the central belt, but still no new junction at Laurencekirk; 120 teaching posts in Aberdeen still vacant; council tax up; income tax up; business rates up; the land and buildings transaction tax unfairly hitting the north-east; psychiatric wards closing; GP surgeries overstretched; planning decisions that were taken by Aberdeenshire Council overridden by the Scottish Government; and our farmers completely and utterly failed. It is quite clear that devolution and the use of devolved powers, as they are at the minute, have not delivered for the people of the north-east of Scotland, but I am an optimist and I think that they really could.

Now is the perfect time to begin a genuine, rational cross-party debate about the future of devolved powers, where they are held, and how they are used. For me, the biggest question has to be: must devolution stop at Edinburgh? Real, accountable local authorities; directly elected and accountable provosts for our cities; a return to local, accountable policing; and more democracy and devolution within Scotland—that is what we need.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the first of the speeches from the Front-Bench spokespeople. I call Mr Tommy Sheppard.

5.8 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is customary, when I rise to make the third party submission, to thank the Member who has brought the debate. On this occasion, I will decline to do that. The Scottish Government are accountable to the elected Members of the Scottish Parliament, who are elected by and accountable to the Scottish people. It is not a matter for this Westminster Parliament—indeed there is an explicit constitutional convention that forbids it—to try to hold to account the Scottish Government, so I wonder why the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has chosen, among all the things he could discuss that affect his constituents, to bring this motion here today.

I conclude that the only possible reason for this debate is not to try to advance or develop public policy but purely and simply political point scoring and to have a go at the SNP. It is a matter of some regret that the hon. Gentleman has been aided and abetted in that endeavour by Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition.

It seems that contributors to the debate cannot make up their mind about whether the problem is that the Scottish Government are not using the powers they have, or whether they are using their powers, as some speakers have complained. The truth is that the Scottish Parliament and Government use their powers every day and in every way to try to make things better for the people of Scotland, but they do so within considerable legislative and financial constraints, which have seen Scottish public funding cut by almost 10% in real terms in a decade.
Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: Sit down, please. I have not got time.

Despite that adversity, there have been many achievements. Time is short, so let me list just 10. First, in Scotland, people get free medicine. Since that policy was introduced, 34,000 free prescriptions have been issued in Stirling.

In Scotland, we do what we can to make taxation progressive. Higher-rate taxpayers in Scotland today pay more than they do in England. People with larger houses pay more when they sell them than they do in England, and people who live in larger houses pay more council tax than they do in England.

Mr Jack: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: No, I will not.

We use the powers we have got. Crime is at an all-time low. More than 1,000 extra police officers have been on the beat over the 10 years of the SNP Government.

Scottish school students’ highers results were a full third higher than they were 10 years ago—a better performance than in any other part of the United Kingdom.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I shall not be giving way at all, because I have not got the time.

Help for small businesses in Scotland is at an unprecedented level, and much higher than it is in the rest of the UK. In Stirling, 4,882 businesses benefit from the small business scheme.

In Scotland, we will ensure that fracking will not take place beneath the houses of people living in Stirling, in line with their publicly expressed wishes. We have done what we can to mitigate the effects of the Westminster Government. We have used the hardship fund to try to mitigate the bedroom tax—a pernicious attack on the poor. In Stirling, there are 1,021 recipients of that fund.

We have a better-performing national health service than any other part of the United Kingdom. There are still many challenges, but there is a higher spend per head, more staff, shorter waiting times and a better public perception.

We have built 60,000 affordable homes in Scotland in the last 10 years, including 3,085 in Stirling, of which 777 are social housing. Most of all, in Scotland, if someone wants to go to university, it is free and they do not have to cripple themselves with unnecessary debt to pursue their education.

Compare and contrast the Scottish Government’s record with that of the Tory Government here in Westminster—a Government who, after just four months in office, appear to be punch-drunk and adrift on a sea of uncertainty and chaos of their own making. I know which Government I would rather have in control of my life: the Scottish Government led by the SNP. No wonder the SNP is 17 points ahead in the opinion polls and the Conservative party is trailing in third place in Scotland. The wafer-thin majority of the hon. Member for Stirling is disappearing day by day.
heard repeated claims that they have no interest in using the Scottish Parliament to deal with them meaningfully. My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) said that 19% of Scots feel that the Scottish Parliament has not risen to the occasion; in fact, they wish to abolish it.

We have to raise our game. We have to look at what we can do to build a credible devolution settlement. We need to use the Scottish Parliament’s powers to maximise the benefit for the Scottish people.

Mr Jack: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Sweeney: No, I do not have time—sorry.

Why has the SNP ignored the will of the Scottish Parliament five times since 2016 on key issues pertaining to things such as the public sector pay cap and raising tax in Scotland to deliver a progressive outcome? The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) talked about workers’ rights, but why is it that only the Labour party has consistently voted to lift the public sector pay cap in both Houses? That is clearly the case, and yet the Scottish Parliament only responded as a result of Labour pressure. The SNP’s record in both Houses is clear. [Interruption.] Its record reflects that, I am afraid.

The only real, practical and progressive measure for tax reform in the Scottish Parliament has come at the behest of the Labour party. Proposals for progressive taxation—potentially raising up to £600 million extra a year in Scotland—would deliver real, meaningful reform, because it would end austerity in Scotland. We would also add £5 a week more to child benefit, which would raise 30,000 children a year out of poverty. That is the opportunity in front of us today.

I am a child of the devolution settlement—I was only seven years old when the vote took place. We have to remember Donald Dewar’s words: it was not an event, but a process—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.

Chris Stephens: On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. In a sedentary intervention, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) claimed that he was at the last debate about the public sector pay cap. I have checked Hansard for 13 September, and he is not listed as having made a contribution in that debate. As an experienced Member of this House, Mr Hollobone, can you advise me what steps an hon. Member who makes an inaccurate claim in a sedentary intervention can take to correct the record?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As I understand it, Hansard is an almost verbatim record of verbal contributions in the House. It does not record attendance. Members may be in the Chamber without making a verbal contribution.

5.20 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on securing this debate, his first in this Chamber. Heartfelt congratulations are very much in order. The debate has provided an important opportunity for us to reflect on devolution within the United Kingdom and within Scotland, and to look ahead to a stronger Holyrood in the next few years as we exit the European Union.

As my hon. Friend highlighted in his speech, it has been just over 20 years since people in Scotland voted to support the creation of a Scottish Parliament with tax-varying powers on 11 September 1997. In just over a year from now we will celebrate a further anniversary, that of Royal Assent of the Scotland Bill in November 1998. The Scotland Act 1998 established the new Scottish Parliament and set out its powers as a legislature within the United Kingdom. Since the Scottish Parliament first sat in May 1999, it has truly come into its own. Devolution is clearly the right approach for Scotland. It is what the people in Scotland voted for and it ensures that decisions are taken at the right level.

The Scottish Government may choose their own path on key policy decisions. Of course, I cannot say that I agree with everything that the Scottish Governments do or have done since 1999. I do not agree, for example, with the SNP Government’s decision to make Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, and I do not agree with how they chose to handle common agricultural policy payments in the past couple of years, but I do agree that it is their right to decide those things for themselves. It is up to the people of Scotland to make their own judgment of their Government in devolved matters.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: I am sorry, I do not have the time.

The SNP are failures—Ruth Davidson has the right ideas. Because of devolution, key decisions about Scotland can be taken in Scotland, while Scotland benefits from the pooling of risk and resources that comes from being part of a successful and historic Union. A powerful Scottish Parliament within a strong United Kingdom offers people in Scotland maximum security and opportunity, representing their interests in the world and allowing resources and risks to be shared effectively.

Devolution has also been shown to be flexible and responsive to changing needs and circumstances. Most recently, the Scotland Act 2016 ensured that the Scottish Parliament has a significantly greater say on matters including further taxation powers and welfare support in Scotland. The Scotland Act is now in the process of being implemented, with a number of its new powers already in force and the Scottish Parliament able to legislate and make choices on a range of new policy areas. The Scottish Parliament also has new powers, for example, to top up reserved welfare benefits or to create new benefits in devolved areas, should it decide to do so. Taken together with the existing powers of the Scottish Parliament, the Act creates an even more powerful and accountable Scottish Parliament within a strong United Kingdom.

That is what the people of Scotland voted for. The Scotland Act balances more decisions being taken in Scotland, closer to those they affect, with retaining the strength and security that comes from membership of the larger United Kingdom. The 2016 Act provides the Scottish Parliament with much greater tax-raising powers,
which means that, from responsibility for raising around 10% of what it spends today, Holyrood will in future be responsible for raising more than 50% of what it spends. With new powers on welfare, the Scottish Government need to publish details of how they plan to support disabled people in Scotland, for example.

Enough of the grievance culture and the obsession with process; the SNP and the Scottish Government must use their powers to serve the people. The Scottish Parliament has unprecedented flexibilities on income tax—to set income tax rates and thresholds for earned income, including the ability to introduce new tax bands—so it is most unfortunate, and I suspect that many in the Chamber who represent seats in Scotland will be dismayed, that that power is being used to hike income tax on Scots in their constituencies and throughout Scotland. It is vital that the new powers are used to the greatest benefit in Scotland. I have heard much concern this afternoon about that not being the case from those on the Conservative Benches, who are rightly concerned that it is not the case.

Ross Thomson: The Minister mentioned income taxes. He is right that the First Minister, in conversation on her programme for government, not only mentioned increased taxes but spoke about her “cast-iron mandate” for independence. Yet she never once mentioned tax increases in her manifestos in 2016 or for the 2017 snap general election. If she is to talk about mandates, there is no mandate for increased taxes.

Michael Ellis: It is vital that the new powers are used to the greatest benefit in Scotland. I have heard much concern this afternoon about that not being the case, and I expect that we will see more of this debate in the coming months, as the Scottish Government outline their plans in their budget and beyond.

Of course, the question is not simply one of existing powers and how they are used. We are now engaged in a new discussion about devolution in the United Kingdom, because leaving the European Union gives us the opportunity to determine where powers that will return from Brussels will best sit.

The UK Government have clear objectives in mind. We want the UK after Brexit to work for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is right that we consider the big picture and ensure that our future constitutional arrangements support our new position in the world as we leave the EU. However, let me be clear that where there is no reason to keep a common framework, we will not, and where there is no reason to hold on to powers, we will not. No powers currently exercised by the Scottish Parliament will be taken away from the Scottish Parliament, and the Government expect that leaving the EU will mean more powers for the devolved Administrations. Only the SNP could turn no powers removed and more powers to come into an alleged power grab.

The time for divisive rhetoric is over, on Brexit and elsewhere across public policy. We have opportunities as we leave the EU to shape the UK and Scotland within the UK. We need to take those opportunities and to consider them properly. In doing so, both Governments have to continue to work together, as people in Scotland rightly expect us to do. It was my pleasure to respond to this debate, and I am sure that the debate on devolution will extend beyond the limited time we have had today.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. Will you advise the Chamber on why a departmental Minister did not respond to the debate and instead that was left to the Deputy Leader of the House?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The rules of engagement in these debates are that Her Majesty’s Government decide which Minister will respond.

5.27 pm

Stephen Kerr: I thank all my colleagues serving in the House of Commons who have come here today to participate in the debate in one form or another. I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. If nothing else, what we have displayed together in Westminster Hall this afternoon is the shared passion and love that we have for Scotland and its people. With that passion and all the arguments that go with it, I hope that there might be enough good will that we can occasionally stretch across the divide between nationalists and Unionists to work together to get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom.

For my part and that of those in my party who serve in the House of Commons, there is nothing but the utmost respect for the institution of the Scottish Parliament. We look forward to the increased powers to which the Minister referred coming to the Scottish Parliament. I note, however, that I found the speech of the SNP Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), to be totally graceless. I do not feel that he did himself any credit in how he conducted himself in this debate. On a personal level, I have always held the hon. Gentleman in a degree of respect, which has sadly been challenged this afternoon by the things he has said and the way in which he has spoken.

Once again, I thank everyone for supporting this debate and for the privilege of leading it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the use of devolved powers in Scotland.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 18 October 2017

[Albert Owen in the Chair]

Surgical Mesh Implants

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Before I call Emma Hardy to move the motion, I must tell hon. Members that the list of speakers is over-subscribed. I ask those who wish to speak and are on the list not to make long interventions, which eat into other hon. Members’ time. I may also have to impose a time limit of four minutes for other speakers after Emma Hardy.

9.30 am

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the risks of surgical mesh implants.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. Many hon. Members present have been contacted by constituents affected by mesh surgery, which is a medical procedure used to treat incontinence and prolapse in women. The surgery, which usually takes less than half an hour, involves inserting a plastic mesh into the vagina to support the bladder, womb or bowel. It can also be used to treat rectal prolapses in both men and women. This debate is crucial, as it gives me and other colleagues the opportunity to be the voice for all those men and women who have been affected. Each individual story fits into the wider national and international narrative. This debate is our opportunity to call on the Government to do something about it and help to end the suffering of thousands of men and women in this country.

The issue of surgical mesh implants was first brought to my attention when I was visited by a constituent. She has just had a hysterectomy. Its impact on her quality of life is devastating. She cannot walk very far now, she is unable to partake in sports and she is having problems with people recognising the symptoms later, that hers was an isolated case and there was no problem. To hear the stories of the women who have suffered complications following their surgery is extremely distressing. Women tell us that they were informed that the surgery would be a quick fix for their bladder problems, that they would be able to continue to have active lifestyles and that their incontinence would be corrected after the 20-minute operation. Women in their 30s, 40s and 50s tell us that they struggle to walk, have lost their sex lives and suffer from horrendous pain day in, day out. Some even suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder following the horrific impact that the mesh has had on their quality of life.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this hugely important and timely debate. One of my constituents contacted me, and in her words:

“I’ve suffered pain, I’ve soiled myself, suffered depression and sepsis. My employment contract as a store manager will be terminated in the next few weeks due to ill health. My life has changed dramatically but others shouldn’t have to suffer the same fate. It really is unacceptable that we are in 2017 and this is allowed to happen.”

I have no doubt that my hon. Friend will agree.

Emma Hardy: Absolutely, that is a really important point. The BBC programme “Inside Out West” that aired just this Monday evening highlighted some of the problems with rectopexy, which is a form of rectal mesh, and the investigation a local trust is carrying out on the surgeon, Mr Dixon. I understand that one of the allegations it is looking into is that girls as young as 17 and 18 have had rectopexy.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for giving national recognition to this important issue. Does she agree with what my constituent said to me: that it is shocking that something so agonising has not had the public recognition it deserves?

Emma Hardy: Absolutely; that is a really important point. The BBC programme “Inside Out West” that aired just this Monday evening highlighted some of the problems with rectopexy, which is a form of rectal mesh, and the investigation a local trust is carrying out on the surgeon, Mr Dixon. I understand that one of the allegations it is looking into is that girls as young as 17 and 18 have had rectopexy.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On that point and the case that is being investigated in Bristol, I understand from my constituent that NHS England will set up 17 regional teams to look at this. Does my hon. Friend agree that that cannot be done on a local, ad hoc basis? There needs to be national co-ordination on this.

Emma Hardy: I absolutely agree with that. That hospital would neither confirm nor deny that those young girls had been operated on. For background information, all the colorectal surgeons who the programme spoke to said that the young women should have been offered other avenues before surgery. The programme also highlighted the extremely concerning practice of one surgeon attaching part of the rectal mesh to the soft tissue on the wall of the vagina. The shocking reason for subjecting women to this was explained by one consultant, who stated that if the rectopexy mesh is...
fitted in that way, the surgeon can charge for vaginal repairs as well as for fitting the mesh. Some of the patients being operated on were not aware of where the mesh was being attached, which raises serious questions about the warnings patients are given.

We must remember that it is not only women affected by this issue; men and women are suffering from chronic pain after having mesh surgery for hernias, using the same material—usually polypropylene plastic—used in vaginal mesh surgery. Research shows that between 10% and 15% of people who have had hernia mesh surgery suffer from chronic pain and complications after surgery. However, as with vaginal mesh surgery, not enough information is available to understand the extent of the risks of surgery.

Thankfully, there are organisations that help those affected to tell their stories. The Sling the Mesh campaign has done an incredible job in highlighting the problems, but there must be a wider effort from the Government to inform members of the public that this is an issue and to encourage them to speak out if they experience problems. Thousands of people have had the procedure over the past two decades without knowing what would happen if their body rejected the plastic mesh or if the mesh harmed their internal organs, leading to many people wanting the mesh removed. However, mesh removal is not a simple solution.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): My constituent Alison had a mesh put in too tight. She was in appalling pain and had to travel all the way from Cumbria to Manchester to get treatment. Now she has had it partially removed, she is in a worse state than ever and has to go back to Manchester again. Does my hon. Friend agree that something has to be done to help people with removal?

Emma Hardy: I absolutely and completely agree. One consultant has written to explain the problems with mesh removal, stating:

“Once stuck the mesh is never fully removed and failure of implanting means that mesh will fuse, erode, stick and adhere to organs, nerves and blood vessels—creating life long...injuries.”

She argues that patients were never clearly told of the risks of mesh fused to organs. She stated further that the “mesh weave that is stuck will become a perfect breeding ground for bacteria”, and unless it is completely removed, the patient will remain continually infected and fatigued forever.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I apologise, Mr Owen, for arriving a little late. I know that the hon. Lady is talking about consultant surgeons, but does she agree with my constituent, Karen, who has corresponded with me to say that there is also a lack of awareness among the general practice community? The procedures are taking place and are deemed to be a success, but these other problems then present themselves and GPs are just not aware of the causal link and how to diagnose it.

Emma Hardy: Absolutely; I will talk about that later. One of the women who wrote to me this week explained that her surgeon was worried about trying to remove a small piece of mesh from the heart of her vital organs, near her bowel and bladder, which he could not actually see by visual examination, ultrasound or X-ray. She explained that, since having the mesh fitted five and a half years ago, it has prevented her body from healing, causing ongoing problems ever since.

This is not an effort to scaremonger. For most, the surgery is successful, but we have estimates from the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency that about 1% to 3% of women suffer complications. A recent report in the scientific journal Nature showed evidence of about 10% of women suffering complications after surgery, and another research study estimates that the figure could be 15% to 20% or even higher.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for calling this incredibly important debate. My constituent Nancy contacted me recently, who had a mesh implant fitted seven but it is still stuck in her life and that of her family have been turned upside down. She is in constant, crippling pain. She needs tramadol, and when the tramadol has not worked, she has been in hospital for four days on morphine. Does the hon. Lady agree that this devastation for women and their families is absolutely intolerable and must never be allowed to happen again?

Emma Hardy: I completely agree. Sadly, that example is reflected across the whole UK. The Department of Health says that in the past 10 years 136,000 women in England were treated with mesh implants for urinary incontinence and organ prolapse, but it is only recently that NHS England has brought in guidelines that require surgeons to inform patients of the possible risks, and even now we do not have accurate information about just how many women are suffering complications after mesh implants. We know that mesh is the subject of international scrutiny, with legal cases in countries around the world, including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, the USA and Venezuela.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Many mesh implants have been fitted at private hospitals rather than NHS hospitals, and we know from the recent case of convicted breast surgeon Ian Paterson that in those circumstances private hospitals deny liability for private surgeons carrying out operations on their premises. Does my hon. Friend agree that that loophole, allowing private healthcare companies to operate under different rules from the NHS, should be looked into and amended?

Emma Hardy: We should be looking into that. I thank my hon. Friend for making that excellent point.

Recently in America, a woman was awarded damages of $57 million in relation to mesh implant surgery, and more than 800 women are currently taking legal action in the UK. Yet so far the Government have sat on the fence on this issue, acknowledging in answers to parliamentary questions from the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and my hon. Friend the Members for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) that it is a problem, but completely failing to create a robust system to ensure that all complications are accurately recorded.

The surgeon Robert Bendavid has argued for longer studies on the women who have had mesh fitted, because in short-term studies the data are not capturing the level of risk. Many of the women who have written to Sling...
the Mesh have reported difficulties three years after having the mesh fitted. The Department does not even have accurate data to show just how many mesh removals have taken place as a result of surgery complications. We must have a proper framework for building an evidence base to determine exactly how widespread this problem is.

The guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence do not provide any information on mesh-removal surgery procedures. I accept the argument for clinical freedom for surgeons and that there are difficulties in testing objects that go into our bodies, but that makes the case for thorough and effective follow-up even more important. There is an ethical duty for surgeons to write and record where there have been complications, so will the Minister commit today to ensuring that all mesh procedures are properly recorded? Will she commit to the mandatory reporting of all complications, and will she commit to raising awareness of this condition?

Raising awareness is not just about raising awareness among the general public. Women are telling us that they are going back to their doctors and surgeons after surgery and being met with blank faces when they describe the complications that they are experiencing. It seems that without adequate research and awareness of the risks of mesh surgery, patients are not receiving the support and aftercare that they need. Although we welcome the resource guide that has been developed to provide GPs with more information about the risks of transvaginal mesh implants, more must be done to encourage dialogue on this issue between GPs and their patients.

Building an evidence base is not the only issue. Many people, most notably the Sling the Mesh campaign, have raised concerns about the fact that previous reviews, especially in England, of surgical mesh have focused solely on the procedural failures of mesh surgery and not looked into the safety of the product itself. That is in line with the findings of a report issued by the EU’s Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks, which said that when assessing the risk associated with mesh application, it is important to consider the overall surface area of material used, the product design and the properties of the material used.

I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on surgical mesh implants—he was of great help to me in preparing this speech—when he says that the fact that many companies have already taken their mesh product off the market should tell us that something is not right with these devices. We have to go to the core of the issue and investigate the fundamental safety of the products. Will the Minister commit to doing all she can to ensure that any future reviews of mesh products look at product safety as well as procedural issues?

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Does she agree that the Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Act 2015—legislation passed by this House two years ago—is relevant? It says:

“The Secretary of State must by regulations impose requirements that the Secretary of State considers necessary to secure that services provided in the carrying on of regulated activities cause no avoidable harm to the persons for whom the services are provided.”

Emma Hardy: I absolutely agree and thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that.

Currently in the UK, there are about 100 types of vaginal mesh implants. Carl Heneghan, professor of evidence-based medicine at the University of Oxford, has raised concerns about the evidence that mesh manufacturers need to provide before their products are approved and made available on the NHS. It is extremely worrying that the Pelvic Floor Society, which is associated with the surgeon Mr Dixon and was set up as a world expert group, is partly sponsored by mesh manufacturers. The BBC spoke to the Pelvic Floor Society on camera during the “Inside Out West” documentary and was told that it had discovered complications only in 2014. However, minutes of a joint meeting of the southern, midland and northern groups of the Pelvic Floor Society in October 2012 say:

“We need to ensure that all individuals are appropriately consented for the risks of mesh placement; Long term Shrinkage, Mesh erosion, Mesh failure. We need to have a prospective registry for” laparoscopic ventral mesh. Why, if the industry knew about these problems in 2012, are they only coming to light now? That is further proof that the Government must do something about this.

One thing that could be done is to follow the recommendations of the all-party parliamentary group and bring forward publication of the NICE guidelines on mesh for stress-related urinary incontinence. Currently, NICE says that it plans to publish revised guidelines in 2019, but we think that is too long to wait. We want NICE to urgently prioritise them. Mesh as a first-line treatment for incontinence and prolapse should be suspended until the NICE guidelines are revisited.

In May this year, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Shona Robison, confirmed that the Scottish Government had suspended the treatment for people with pelvic organ prolapse. Until we have a proper understanding of just how many women are suffering from mesh injury, we think the surgery should be suspended, but in all cases, not just for pelvic organ prolapse.

Professor Carl Heneghan says that some of the devices used in mesh treatment have not been clinically tested or trialled and that the number of people affected by mesh injury means that this could be one of the biggest medical scandals of our time. Suzy Elneil, consultant urologist at University College London, has also warned about the number of women affected by mesh injury. She is one of the few qualified surgeons in the UK who can remove mesh once it has been fitted and she tells me that she sees about 15 women a week who are suffering following mesh surgery. Consultant gynaecologist Dr Wael Agur from the University of Glasgow was once an expert group, is partly sponsored by mesh manufacturers.

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Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I apologise for arriving late to the debate, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Lady on holding this important debate. The point that she makes about long-term complications is just as important as that about the
short-term complications. My constituent developed fibromyalgia as a result of the complications arising from her mesh surgery for stress urinary incontinence. Does the hon. Lady agree that long-term conditions such as that must be taken into account?

Emma Hardy: Absolutely. Studies need to go far beyond the two years.

I am delighted that Labour has called for a public inquiry into the use of mesh. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) rightly said, it is extremely worrying that mesh surgery has been introduced so widely, with so little evidence and with limited trials to support it.

I call on the Government to do four things. First, they must commit to a full retrospective and mandatory audit of all interventions that involved mesh, followed by a full public inquiry. Secondly, they must suspend prolapse and incontinence mesh operations while the audit is being carried out. Thirdly, they must bring the NICE guidelines for mesh in stress-related urinary incontinence forward from 2019 to 2018. Fourthly, they must raise awareness among the general public and GPs.

Mesh implants have affected thousands of people all over the country. For some, the consequences of operations will be life-changing and devastating. A Government commitment to taking these actions will not undo the suffering and pain that these people have endured, but would go a long way to making sure that nothing like this happens again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I must now impose a time limit of four minutes for each speech.

9.50 am

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. As co-chair of the all-party group, I am delighted to speak in this debate; I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing it.

As MP for a Scottish constituency, I will focus on the situation in Scotland, where the devastating effects of mesh surgery were first brought to our attention by the campaign group Scottish Mesh Survivors, which is made up of women and their families whose lives have been ruined by the procedure. The group is led by my constituent, Elaine Holmes, who brought the issue to the Scottish Parliament’s Public Petitions Committee in May 2014. Through the group’s efforts, a request to suspend the surgery was announced by the then Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Health and an independent review group was established.

Scotland had an opportunity to lead the way, but, to my deepest regret, it has lost the initiative. The independent review group’s final report, which was published in March this year, has rightly been termed a whitewash. It refused to recommend a ban on transvaginal mesh implants; an entire chapter with key evidence highlighting the dangers of mesh was omitted; recommendations were weighted in favour of mesh, at the expense of safer non-mesh alternatives; and the review group’s chair was replaced late in the process. Patient representatives were excluded from meetings over 10 months and ultimately resigned from the review group, alongside a consultant physician, branding the report “not in our name”.

Disappointingly, the Scottish Government elected to accept the review group’s recommendations in full. As a result, Scottish Mesh Survivors has been forced to go back to the drawing board and is once again pursuing justice through the Scottish Parliament’s Public Petitions Committee.

One of the most common arguments against reclassification is that the evidence to support such a move is not there. I disagree. I standoulder to shoulder with women like Elaine and the numerous other mesh-injured women who have rightly proclaimed, “We are the evidence.”; with women like Lorna Farrell, another constituent who has suffered devastating injuries from the procedure; with women like Leslie McGlinchey, a mum of two who was not even 30 when she had the operation and now spends a huge amount of time in a wheelchair. Leslie frequently has to explain to her two little girls why mummy keeps falling over. She was told that a 20-minute operation would change her life. Well, they weren’t wrong. Women who have lost their careers, their husbands, their homes, their dignity and their lives; who are forced to spend day after day and night after night in agony; who are left with little option but to make use of wheelchairs and walking aids just to get by—they are the evidence.

It is increasingly clear that when women are fully informed of the potentially life-altering consequences of mesh surgery, they reject the procedure outright. Dr Wael Agur, the consultant physician who resigned from the independent review group, spoke at a recent petition hearing on the subject in the Scottish Parliament. He informed the meeting that, out of 22 women who had made use of his health board’s shared decision-making tool to assess whether mesh was right for them, only one indicated that she was in favour of the procedure, and it was later discovered that she had not read the leaflet properly.

The Scottish Conservatives, led on this issue by my colleague Jackson Carlaw MSP, have been at the forefront of the debate in Scotland since the scandal first erupted, working closely with Scottish Labour, which is led on the issue by Neil Findlay MSP. We have stood firmly behind the women whose lives have been devastated by mesh. I urge party colleagues south of the border to be alive to the issue, to act now while they have the opportunity, and—please—to suspend this procedure. If they are not convinced that there is enough evidence, they should suspend the procedure while they gather the evidence.

Mesh is rapidly becoming one of the great global health scandals. I implore all hon. Members to do what we can to protect women from this potentially devastating procedure and to ensure that our nation becomes an example to others of how to achieve justice for all those who have been broken by mesh.

9.54 am

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): This is an important debate for me and for so many hon. Members because of what our constituents are telling us. I pay tribute to
my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for giving voice, with great eloquence and passion, to an issue that so many of us feel strongly about. We have wanted a debate in this House for a long time, and I am pleased that she secured it.

My hon. Friend spoke for the women, many of whom are in the Gallery watching the debate, who want and need us to amplify their voice. One of the most heart-rending things for them has been the sense that they have not been listened to and their voice has not been heard. Our job is to listen and to be as brave as them by speaking in this debate and amplifying their voice. This topic has not had the coverage that it deserves, because it is complex, clinical and disputed. It is difficult to see a way through the clinical evidence and feel that we, as non-clinicians, can make sensible remarks without scaremongering, but we need to be brave and engage intellectually to try to understand it.

In truth, the story is quite simple. Since 2000, these products have been diligently marketed by the devices industry as a quick fix—an easy solution to stress-related incontinence or other problems for young women who want to maintain active lifestyles post-childbirth by doing exercise and other ordinary things that we take for granted. The products, which had not been widely used by the clinical world, became used all over the world. Approximately 130,000 women in the UK have had devices implanted.

The regulators and the clinical guidelines said that the risk was between 1% and 3%. However, behind those statistics, the reality has emerged that for a significant number of women—not the majority, but a significant minority—the devices have resulted in chronic, life-changing adverse effects such as sexual dysfunction, loss of mobility, and inability to work. Those effects ought to be taken seriously by us and by the medical fraternity. Instead, they have been dismissed and, worse still, women have been patronised by being told that their problems were unique, which is not the case.

There are questions to address, and the Minister needs to come up with some answers—I know that she is engaging seriously with this debate. If a medicine marketed to deal with incontinence led in one out of 10 cases to sexual dysfunction or the inability to walk or work, it would not be on the market. Surely she agrees that that is how we need to look at it. In Health questions last week, I think she said that the NICE guidelines are expected in 2018—next year. That is not what NICE is saying. Will she clarify whether the guidelines are coming forward to next year, as she implied? I am not sure whether she simply misspoke.

Finally, will the Minister ensure that, as the Government’s representative, she listens to the women who have been mis-sold these devices and lied to about the relative risk? They now feel that they are being listened to at last, but they need their Government to listen and to take action. Guidelines should be brought forward and mesh should be suspended until we know what the real risks are.

9.58 am

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this vital debate.

I knew nothing about surgical mesh until I was elected in 2015. Since then, women who have written to me or sat opposite me in my surgery have introduced me to their experience: a world of untold suffering, misery, distress and anxiety, which could and should have been avoided. I can add little to the debate other than to describe the experience of ladies in west Cornwall. A constituent in Helston writes: “Before mesh, I was a vibrant and active woman, positively contributing to my community and society. Mesh has ruined my life with devastating life-altering consequences. Life is now marked by overwhelming daily challenges to my physical, psychological, social, occupational, and financial health and wellbeing. I am unable to work which adds to the financial stress. I am primarily housebound and not able to participate in the lives of family and friends, which I find most heartbreaking. I have three beautiful granddaughters...who live in...Germany. It has been a year since I have been able to visit and look into their curiously beautiful eyes.

I have a Masters Degree in Psychology which has helped me to cope with the devastating life-altering limitations and overwhelming daily challenges of living with significant mesh complications. The pain, discouragement, depression and anxiety is overwhelming every day, and excruciating on others, which is why I have also sought the support of occupational therapists, health psychologists and mental health professionals.”

Another constituent of mine states that the Food and Drug Administration in the USA has issued strict guidelines for mesh use and that in the USA a warning is given to patients about the potential dangers. She had a mesh implant to correct a pelvic prolapse and was told by her doctor that her quality of life would be significantly better, but it has not been. Her retirement has been ruined. She used to walk miles every day with her dogs but now struggles to walk due to pain and feels she might have to go into a wheelchair, as even the shortest walk around the house causes excruciating pain.

More recently, a lady came to see me in my surgery and talked about her experience. She had undergone an operation where a surgical mesh was used. After complications, she underwent a second procedure, during which the mesh was accidentally compromised, and she now suffers recurrent uterine prolapse. The surgeon has written to her, explaining the damage caused during the surgery, and has stressed the need for urgent further intervention, but she has been told that she cannot have surgery until May 2018. Until my intervention, she did not expect to hear back from the hospital until December at the earliest.

Further stories have emerged, including that of a constituent whose mesh eroded through her bladder and vagina. The mesh had been inserted in 2008 for stress urinary incontinence. At the time her complications emerged, there were only two surgeons in England who specialised in removing such mesh. One was in Oxford and one in London, both of which are a long way from west Cornwall.

Finally, another constituent of mine had transobturator tape, or TVTO, inserted five years ago to treat stress urinary incontinence. The device immediately caused saddle anaesthesia with associated bladder, bowel and sexual dysfunction. The mesh was removed after two years but my constituent’s chronic pain continues, due to nerve damage.

For those ladies, little can be done to put right years of discomfort, distress and indignity. What they want is for the Department of Health to allow the use of mesh
only in the most serious of cases, where no other option is available. A husband of a patient whose suffering continues following her surgical mesh implant writes:

“Our ultimate desire and goal is to see a complete ban on surgical mesh procedures so other women need not suffer the same appalling life-altering complications.”

I pay tribute to my constituents who have lived with this harm and who are willing to face up to the indignity of talking about their experiences, so that others do not suffer a repeat.

10.2 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on bringing a major issue to the fore. I say “major”, not because there are necessarily millions of people involved—the final number of women who have been affected is not yet known—but because the impact that this issue has had on the lives of the people who have been affected by it is major and heart-breaking, and it deserves attention and action from this place.

I have received a large number of emails from Northern Irish people outlining their horrific experiences and some of the ladies affected are in the Gallery today. It would seem that in an attempt to access a cheaper form of surgery, we are putting some people at risk of horrific complications. It is clear that this surgery must be used only after the full extent of the dangers is outlined and fully understood by women, and once they accept that this option comes with a massive warning.

One of my constituents contacted me about this issue. She has not worked for two years and she will have an operation very shortly. In the short time that I have in which to speak, I will say that another woman—she is not from my constituency, but from the constituency of my party leader—contacted me and outlined her case. Her experiences are clearly similar to those of other women who have been affected:

“Listed are just a few of what I have and am still enduring since the surgeon inserted this foreign object into my body: Constant agonising pain, as if I was being cut inside... Inability to bend over without crying out in agonising pain... Constant urine and bladder infections... Inability to carry out my duties associated with my occupation... Inability to enjoy any social life whatsoever”.

She is also unable to have intimate relations with her husband, which she says has been “detrimental to my marriage”. She is also suffering:

“Depression and extreme low self esteem... Sweating profusely... Inability to walk or exercise due to chronic pain and fatigue... Severe agonising pain passing urine... Visits to A&E with agonising pains in my groin, legs and pelvic area... Visits to out of hours doctors and many visits to my GP practice”.

She says she has had:

“Regular phone calls and visits to the continence nurses to find my bladder was not emptying properly and each time told my urine sample showed up infection and blood. My family as a unit...”

This is a lady who is wearing what amounts to—I say this with respect—adult nappies, and I for one am not prepared to ignore her story.

There are some 250 members of the Meshed Up Northern Ireland support group and their pleas are very clear. There are no options in Northern Ireland for the surgery that is necessary. All those ladies who have had mesh implants must come across the water for surgery. Some have had operations; some are about to have an operation.

My party is very concerned about that situation and, for the record, we are asking for the best possible information, including better data for women considering this procedure; an improved and more holistic approach to caring for these women; updating of clinical guidance and standards; increased awareness among GPs of post-operative problems, with better access to follow-up clinical expertise for those women with problems; and a more complete picture of the level and seriousness of the complications. There must be standardised information for patients and a more consistent consent process, so that when women are asked about these operations they understand what they mean and the implications, because they have not been told—at least my constituents were never told—about the implications and had no idea what the operation meant. We are asking for specialist centres with multidisciplinary teams to advise on and treat complications and post-operative problems; a minimum workload of cases for surgeons carrying out relevant procedures; and further ongoing research into mesh procedures and adverse effects.

All those things would be best considered within an inquiry. That is what I am asking for today, that is what my constituents are asking for, and that is what all the sufferers from this problem in Northern Ireland are asking for.

10.6 am

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this debate, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen.

I, too, have applied for debates on this subject in the House, so this debate is welcomed by all parties. Like other colleagues, I am pleased that this issue is being discussed so openly, and it is absolutely vital that Ministers listen to the UK-wide concerns that are being raised. I have heard from Eastleigh constituents who have shared simply horrific accounts of the long-term difficulties that they have experienced as a result of having had a mesh implant, so I am very pleased to contribute to this debate.

I was also contacted via Facebook by a long-term friend who wanted to tell me her story after having her third child, and to link me into the Sling the Mesh group, which, as we know, is an ever-growing group, with more than 3,500 women involved with it. After an operation three weeks earlier, my friend had to self-catheterise. It was simply hideous. She said:

“It would seem that health professionals do not want to quite hear the truth or tell the truth about the complications of mesh or the TVTO surgery”, which she had had. She felt that because the condition was so embarrassing, it was just being under-reported.

After a woman has had a baby, especially her first, she always listens to the professionals. Pain and suffering after a birth are not unusual, but two or three years after giving birth many women are in pain, with incontinence, with an impact on family life, with no sex life, and with no opportunity to play sport or to enjoy time with their children down at the park, or to enjoy time as a family and have time with their partner. Too
many women are simply being ignored, post-pregnancy and through the long-term impact, as we have heard. GPs seemingly do not have a full understanding of this matter.

Let us be in no doubt: in some cases, but not the majority, this option is perhaps appropriate for women, but it must be carried out by trained surgeons. However, one more woman suffering in the way that many of our constituents have suffered is one woman too many. We have heard such stories today. So today I urge us to look at all those women who have been so dramatically affected by the long-term impact of trusting the advice of their surgeon. We must make sure that if anyone has a mesh implant put in, they really understand the impact.

I will give one further example that I have been informed about, which is the case of a lady in my local area who had surgical mesh implanted five years ago. Further treatment is ongoing; she has had multiple complications and operations. Her case has also been raised with me by her father, who has spelled out the heartbreak of seeing his daughter in so much pain.

I call on the Minister to ask the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency to work further with the mesh working group to ensure that all those who use mesh know that it is the right treatment for them and fully understand all the issues and concerns that exist about mesh. Nobody should come away from this debate unaware of the warnings and complications. There is no doubt that if someone is suffering, mesh could be a good option for them. However, professionals should ensure that it is the right course for them.

I finish by strongly urging the Minister to act on this worrying, UK-wide concern. Let us not be afraid to end the suffering and let us be prepared to make sure that no further harm is caused by this issue. We should also be bold, because women’s health matters and family lives are simply being blighted.

10.10 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your excellent chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for taking this important debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this important debate.

In the brief time available, I would like to touch on the all-party parliamentary group on surgical mesh implants, of which I am proud to be an officer.

When one in 15 women fitted with the most common type of mesh will require surgery to extract it, it is clear that the issue needs to be addressed nationally. The figures are staggering and the situation is like Russian roulette. Mesh is resulting in women being unable to walk, go to work, go about their everyday lives or enjoy a fulfilling sex life. More than 800 women in the UK are taking legal action against the manufacturers of the product, so it is clear that the problem is not just going to go away.

The NHS tells us that insufficient reporting and under-published data are contributing to the problem. A basic requirement should be a register of women who have had the implants, so that we can truly assess the potential impact. Regulators around the world have been demanding more testing to ensure that the mesh is as effective for treating prolapses as it is for other conditions. We cannot just sit on the fence; the problem is ongoing. We cannot just sit around waiting for the guidance to be published, whether that is next year or not. With so many people affected, there must be an immediate inquiry. We cannot wait—too many women are experiencing severe pain and discomfort because of these products. Now is the time for the Government to carry out a full audit, establish a register and look to find a way to eliminate the damage and destruction to women’s lives that the mesh has caused. Now is the time to sling the mesh.

10.12 am

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this important debate. In the brief time available, I would like to touch on the issues of how we allowed this situation to continue to for so long, consent, clinical quality and governance, including in the private sector, and what we should be doing going forward.

First, I pay tribute to the many women who have been courageous in coming forward and discussing intensely painful and personal experiences, not only with myself but with other Members. I would like to quote one, who said: “I am in so much pain at times that I just give up on the day. The pain never goes, it just varies in intensity.”

We have heard numerous examples of how these devices are deeply impacting on people’s lives with life-changing symptoms. In many cases, those symptoms were not life-changing before the procedure. Many women have delayed symptoms or were unaware that they had these devices inserted in the first place. Women have told me that they did not consent to these devices being inserted and were not informed of the risks. A fundamental principle of consent is that unless the consent is informed, it is not consent at all.

It is very difficult for women to be properly advised of the complications when we have such poor data, and that goes to the heart of the scandal. The clinical trials of these products were inadequate. We know now that variations in the type of mesh lead to a greater or lesser risk of complications in the first place, yet these products were varied and introduced and marketed aggressively without adequate clinical trials, and that is why there has been such a long delay before action has finally been taken. I hope the Minister will address that in her remarks, because if clinical trials are not a fundamental condition for the introduction of new devices, we will see this situation with other devices.

Another concern is the way that such procedures are used. We saw variation in the techniques with which these devices were introduced. We must have an absolute guarantee that there will be proper clinical trials, just as we would expect for the introduction of medicines.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that if the companies failed to introduce proper clinical trials at the outset, they should now be queueing up to ask these women to come forward so that they can look at the specific cases where the devices have failed? They should be begging these women to come forward.
Dr Wollaston: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, but many women were not even informed that they had the devices in the first place. Other Members have touched on the fact that the complications can be late in arising and because of the inadequacy of recording, it is very difficult for women to come forward.

In the brief time available, I would like to mention the yellow card scheme—I will add links on my social media later—which enables women to self-report complications. However, if someone does not know they have had the device fitted they will not report those complications. There is work to raise awareness among GPs of the possibility that symptoms that women present with are related to mesh, to ensure that those women are referred. I welcome the specialist centres that have been set up to treat women who have been so adversely affected by mesh, but if mesh is inserted in the first place, it should absolutely be done in specialist centres.

I do not agree that we should ban mesh, because for some women the symptoms of stress urinary incontinence or prolapse can be life-altering. We should retain it as an option where alternative procedures may create worse outcomes or worse complications, but there must be adequate consultation with women about the risks so that they can weigh them up. I agree with Members who have said they hope that NICE can prioritise the development of more detailed guidance, so that we may have it as soon as possible.

A fundamental absence of data is at the heart of the issue. There has been cavalier practice, and we cannot allow that to continue. The women who have been affected deserve an apology and recognition of the extent of the problem and the delays in recognising and dealing with it. I welcome the findings of the mesh oversight group report, which describes pragmatic and practical recommendations, but clear failings have been allowed to continue for so long. At the heart of those failings is the inadequacy of clinical trials, recording and consent. Finally, we know that the devices are regulated by the European Union. I hope the Minister will comment on how the Government propose to take this issue forward after we leave the European Union. At the heart of it is the need to ensure that the safety of women is prioritised at all times.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I thank the Chair of the Health Committee.

10.17 am

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this important debate. I also pay tribute to the incredible work of my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), whose campaign has ensured that those women affected by mesh implants have a voice and are being listened to. They may receive some reassurance from the fact that we are debating the issue today.

I have a constituent who is suffering from the consequences of a failed mesh implant. She met me recently and explained the debilitating and life-changing consequences of a failed mesh implant. She spoke of the pressure that put on her family, with her children left to care for her and her husband unable to work overtime due to childcare commitments. It has prevented her from having friends over, stopped family holidays and left her disconnected from her community, being unable to walk or drive without excruciating pain. The financial burden and personal impact on her family has been immense. She described the effect on her mental health. She has uncontrollable mood swings, angry outbursts and frustration at not being able to care for her young family. She now faces many more procedures and many more months of pain before she can even dare to think about her future.

There are many more women like my constituent, as we have heard today, and I pay tribute to the bravery of these women who have come forward to demand that they be heard and that their stories are told and acted upon; but these are the women we know about. Alarmingly, many are not aware that post-operative issues may be a direct result of the implants. The worrying narrative emerging is that many women who have had the implants and have since experienced problems are only now finding out about the complications that mesh can cause. Women who have had the procedure should be contacted directly and made aware of the issues we are debating here today.

Women who have suffered such debilitating effects deserve a full inquiry to determine how it could have happened and what steps will be taken to ensure such a situation never happens again. I therefore agree with the APPG’s recommendation to suspend the procedures pending a NICE guideline review to protect the health and wellbeing of more women.

I hope this debate will ensure that the Government listen to the women affected by the implants. I hope they will confirm their commitment to investigate the situation fully and take urgent action to prevent other women going through some of the horrific ordeals we have heard about today.

10.20 am

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this debate. I did not know about the subject until a constituent came to see me on Friday. The stories in the Chamber today from all parts of the realm—from Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England—with every Member of Parliament telling a similar tale, show that this is the tip of the iceberg and that there are many hundreds, if not thousands, of women out there who could be struggling. Of course, they may not know yet that they will have a problem, because we do not have the data.

My constituent who came to see me is incredibly brave. She could not make herself at all comfortable during my surgery, but leant forward with her hands on the table. She could not sit, could not stand straight and could not bend over. As the consultation went on, she was sweating more and more with pain. It is all very well having sweeping statements about ruined sex lives and constant pain, but what does that mean? My constituent, who is only 47 years old, was more concerned about my embarrassment as she told me her story than she was about herself. A lot of women do not want to embarrass us, but we are the postmen for relaying stories back to Government.
My constituent said that during sex four years after the operation her husband ended up with a cut and bleeding penis. Further surgery has taken place and intercourse is now completely impossible. This lady had a loving and physical relationship with her husband, and after further surgery now has no sexual stimulation at all. Indeed, she told me that any clitoral stimulation had immediately become a huge abdominal pain. She has also been diagnosed with a low level of infection. There is a shocking statistic: research has shown that 83.6% of implants have been found to have vaginal bacteria on them. That is an important statistic because the Medical Devices Regulations 2002 state that before a medical device can be placed on the market, the manufacturer must ensure that the device meets essential requirements, which include sterility and minimising the risks of contamination.

My constituent was a physiotherapist and had led a very active life. She can now barely get through a day. She was not told about the risks of the operation. Her prolapse was not serious enough to demand such an operation, but she was told, “We can sort that out.” It was not until 2013 that she was told she had a vaginal extension. She was told by the surgeon, “Don’t worry; you truly have a designer vagina now,” which showed a complete lack of sympathy and understanding that is scandalous.

We are debating the issue and showing that the scandal has moved forward. I did a lot of work on the thalidomide campaign and I thought this was the next thalidomide scandal. That is how Sky News described it this morning in recognition of how serious this matter is. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) has said, there may be areas where the procedure can be used, but at a minimum the situation warrants a suspension of use at this stage, as has happened in the United States and in Scotland. My constituent is a generous woman. She said, “I don’t expect you to understand this quickly, but please raise my voice today in Parliament.”

Suspension and study of the data is vital; otherwise, we could be creating the biggest scandal in years in the NHS.

10.24 am

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Owen, for chairing this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this important Westminster Hall debate on International Menopause Day.

Women are always reluctant to speak out about the personal and intimate medical issues that they experience. Sadly, they are highlighted only when things go wrong. Two women in my constituency have spoken out about their experiences, but I urge all women who have suffered as a result of a mesh implant to get in touch with their MP, because we know there are many other cases. As we have heard, there are women suffering whom we do not know about.

Recently I met a constituent of about my age whose life has been devastated. She had a mesh fitted in December 2011 and knew immediately that something was wrong. She could hardly move her right leg. She had pain all across her lower abdomen and back and in the right side of her groin. She had infections in the operation sites and was given three lots of antibiotics. Three weeks later the consultant said that she had mesh exposure. She was admitted on 3 February for what she thought was a removal, but it turned out to be for steroid injections, which did not alleviate the pain.

She was then sent for internal physiotherapy. I imagine that was very painful. She has also received physio on her back because of back pain. She saw numerous consultants and had many scans. Eventually, after bursting into tears during a physio session because of the pain she was in, she ended up seeing another consultant, who decided she should be admitted to remove the mesh. The operation was in August 2012 and she was pain-free for about a year after, but then it started again. She had constant pain in the groin, back, and across the lower abdomen, and she went back and forth to the doctor in the familiar scenario that we are hearing about today. It was even thought she might have bladder cancer, but all the scans were clear and still she was in constant pain.

My constituent was under the impression that the mesh had been removed, so when they were all scratching their heads and saying they did not understand why she was in pain, she was told she should try and manage it better. Understandably, she did not know where to turn. Eventually she saw a different consultant who asked her what she could feel inside, and she said it was the mesh. It turned out they had only cut the mesh in half. It was still there—no wonder she was in so much pain. Again, she went in for removal in August 2015. Unable to pass urine for three weeks, she had to self-catheterise at home.

About nine weeks later she started to feel as though she was getting on her feet again and was relatively pain-free for about a year, but it flared up again. She had another round of video urodynamics done, which was not pleasant. She was told that the corner pieces of the mesh were still there and it was too risky to remove them. After a recent flare-up with severe inflammation, she was sent for an urgent scan. Having spent the past six years in constant pain and discomfort, she does not have a partner because so much time is taken up looking after herself and her son and working.

During a visit to the constituent this year he asked what she wanted him to do. She said, “I came to be under your care because I was incontinent. I am still under your care six years later, still incontinent, and in pain as well now, so you tell me what you are going to do.” We must realise these women need help. As the MP for Gower, I have talked about my constituent and the plight of mesh-injured women. Many women do not like to discuss this topic and they do not want to complain. We cannot wait until 2019 for NICE to bring out guidance. I echo the words of the shadow Minister for Public Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), by asking the Government to hold a public inquiry into the numbers of women adversely affected.
raise the profile of an issue that I confess I knew virtually nothing about until quite recently. I congratulate the many Members who have made powerful speeches explaining the experiences of women in their constituencies.

As I have said, I knew nothing about this issue, but its seriousness was brought home to me when a constituent came to see me. He had had an inguinal hernia repair that developed complications because of the mesh used in the procedure. It left him in agony; he described it as having a metal plate wedged in his lower abdomen. Eventually, he had to have corrective surgery, but it did not resolve the chronic pain that he suffers. That points to one of the unique aspects of this problem, which is the difficulty of removing the mesh and correcting the initial surgery. He had the mesh removed, but he is still in constant pain. I think that is partly due to the fact that the expertise in removing mesh implants is not really there.

**Alec Shelbrooke:** My constituent described it as trying to remove hair from chewing gum, which shows just how utterly complicated this surgery is.

**Jeff Smith:** That is an important, well-made point. The failure of the procedure that my constituent went through has changed his life. He was previously a runner, cyclist and mountain-climber—a very active man. He now struggles to get around. When he came to see me, he had to stand throughout our meeting because of the pain that he is in. He is now suffering with a chronic condition as a result of the failed procedure.

My constituent has been in contact with a number of other men—and is aware of many others—who are in this difficult situation. He asked me to ask the Minister two questions. First, how many men have gone through this procedure and had it fail? Secondly, will the scope of any future NHS investigations be widened to include men as well as women? I do not want to downplay the seriousness of the issue for women, which has been clearly explained by a number of Members today, but any investigation needs to take the experience of men into account.

As it happens, my constituent underwent his procedure in a private hospital, which points to three wider issues that he asked me to raise. First, there is a lack of clarity—as we have already heard—about the roles and responsibilities within private hospitals and between hospitals, surgeons and others involved in the process. Secondly, there is no mandatory reporting of chronic pain incidents following unsuccessful operations; that clearly needs to be addressed.

Thirdly, there is a three-year limit to medical negligence claims, which has had an impact on my constituent and possibly others as well. My constituent had his operation just under three years ago, but he has been managing his agonising pain and chronic condition for the last two years and has not really been able to think about whether there is a medical negligence claim. He does not really have time now to lodge one within the three-year limit. I would be interested to hear the Minister say something on those matters.

I conclude by supporting the other points that have been made by hon. Members about the prioritisation of this issue by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the need for a full public inquiry.
review by the chief medical officer in Scotland. All the evidence that was submitted to the review are available on the website, along with the different drafts. It is important that we make it clear that the evidence has been fully published, and that the recommendations were made independently by the review and have been accepted in full by the chief medical officer in Scotland, who has been clear that the requested suspension of the use of mesh implants should remain in place until she is satisfied that the recommendations have been implemented.

An oversight group will oversee the recommendations and will be expected to put the patient at the heart of everything it does. Professor Alison Britton has been asked to examine the review process itself, to listen to and take on board some of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman raised. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what discussions she has had with colleagues in Scotland about what lessons can be learned from some of the questions that have been asked there.

The Scottish Government have no power to ban the use of mesh, because the matter remains reserved to the Westminster Parliament and, in particular, to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. The Sling the Mesh campaign, as we have heard from a number of Members, has asked for some clarity from the MHRA and a stronger, more stringent system of auditing the efficacy of mesh and other medical practices.

One of the most important things that has come through clearly in the debate is the collection and analysis of data, so that a full picture of the situation can be brought up. We have heard so many times of individual cases where people are told, “This is just you; this is an isolated case,” when it very clearly is not. The evidence has to be gathered, and full investigations have to take place and continue.

There is a clear expectation that the MHRA must continue to review the use of medical mesh implants. That should include considering all available evidence and taking lessons from the use of such implants further afield, such as in the United States and Europe. That is important to ensure not only that the best healthcare options are provided, but that women can be confident that the services they have received have been shown to be effective under robust and effective clinical trials—an important point, which was stressed by the hon. Member for Totnes. One of the key things I have learned from this debate is the difference between the testing regime for medicines and the testing regime for implants and other medical devices. There is clearly a cross-party consensus on that, and I hope the APPG will continue to look at the issue.

I welcome the conclusions and recommendations of the Scottish and English reviews of the use of this procedure. We must ensure that surgical mesh implants are used only after all other appropriate alternatives have been exhausted and, crucially, only when women give their fully informed consent.

Once again, I pay tribute to the campaigners for their bravery and courage and for bringing this issue to our attention. I hope it is not a totally inappropriate comparison, but this reminds me of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, during which individual, isolated cases started to snowball, and the issue got on to the agenda. The campaign for justice made progress, and is now being heard loud and clear. There is a parallel with this campaign, although it is not exactly the same. I hope the Government listen. We have to thank those campaigners for the small and belated progress that has been made. They will rightly hold us to account to ensure we make progress.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this very important debate and for her excellent contribution. The Opposition fully support her four asks of the Government.

I commend all other speakers for their thoughtful and passionate contributions, and I thank their constituents who allowed their experiences to be shared with us. I especially want to thank Kath Sansom, who leads the Sling the Mesh campaign, for all her hard work in uniting the women affected by vaginal mesh implants and for raising awareness of the tragic impact that mesh implants have had on so many lives. I also thank other hon. Members who have spoken out about this issue for such a long time—in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who spoke with such knowledge and passion. It was vital that he took part in this debate, and I thank him for everything he has done on the issue.

The experiences we have heard about today are incredibly distressing. I have the utmost sympathy for those suffering because of mesh implants. We are here to stand up for those women, and we seek answers and Government action on their behalf.

Let us start at the beginning. When women are told that the best course of action is to have a mesh implant. They are told that the procedure is quick and cheap, but, as we have heard, the low financial cost of the implants is far outweighed by the huge human cost to those women for the rest of their lives.

The NHS and the MHRA say that the risk of complications is low, at 1% to 3%, but a report by nine leading medics put the risk much higher, at 15%. If leading bodies and medical professionals cannot agree, how can patients be expected to make informed decisions?

Health professionals are supposed to outline clearly and explicitly the risks of any operation that a patient is asked to undergo to ensure they can weigh up the risks and benefits for themselves.

As we have heard, the mesh implants are made of the same material as some drinks bottles. They can shrink, twist and curl at the edges. The material can degrade, cut through internal tissues, poke through the vaginal wall and stick to organs, causing pain, incontinence, urinary infections and a loss of sex life. Marriages have been destroyed and people have been left unable to walk, work or even to pick up their young children.

Knowing those risks, how many in this Chamber would consent to a mesh implant? It is time to take women’s health and wellbeing seriously. They need to be listened to. Their voices need to be heard and their concerns believed so we can put right this injustice and prevent it from going on any longer.

Since this debate was announced, I have been inundated with emails and tweets telling harrowing stories of how women have been affected by vaginal mesh implants. I am sure everyone in the Chamber has received the same
sort of emails. Just last night—very late in the day—I received an email from Sling the Mesh with an attachment containing 210 emails out of the 400 it received following the Minister’s answer to my question during Health questions last week, when she said there is not enough evidence to ban the mesh. Those emails are packed with evidence, and I am very happy to pass them on to the Minister. They all detail how the implants have been life-changing, but unfortunately not for the better.

Julie has had to give up her job as a paramedic, and is now trapped in a world of pain and medication. Kath has lost her passion for mountain biking because it is now impossible to get on the bike. Suzi says that her pain consumes her every day.

Another woman, Tina, also shared her experiences. For four years, she went to her GP and accident and emergency several times with excruciating pain, and was sent from pillar to post. She was told that the pain was due to irritable bowel syndrome, painful bladder syndrome and a slipped disc, and that the mesh implant was absolutely not the problem. After four years of searching for answers, she went private and spoke to a surgeon who finally believed her pleas about her pain and partially removed the mesh. She says that her recovery has been successful and she is no longer in pain, which is excellent, but four years is such a long time to lose. We know that many, many women are unable to go private to end their trauma, but they should not have to do so.

After this debate, there is a lobby of mesh-injured women, which I encourage the Minister to attend. We will be joined by Dr Robert Bendavid, who has flown in overnight from Canada. That shows that this really is a worldwide scandal. Many countries, including our own, are just waking up to the horrors of vaginal mesh. In Australia the Senate is holding an inquiry, and in the US vaginal mesh has been considered a high-risk device for nearly a decade. As we heard, vaginal mesh has been suspended in Scotland since 2014, yet across the border the Government have rejected a ban in England and have failed to empathise with the approximately 8,000 women who have been admitted to hospital with a mesh complication. That is not surprising, considering that just 1,000 mesh admissions have been reported to the MHRA as a mesh-related issue. Surgeons are clearly reluctant to report that mesh is the issue, which lets their patients down and distresses them further.

Our next concern is what the Government are going to do to support women who have had to leave because of the effect of vaginal mesh. Most GPs do not attribute the pain to the mesh, so it is very difficult for those women to claim personal independence payments, disability living allowance or any other benefits. They have to rely on their families’ finances, which is incredibly frustrating and distressing to the victims, especially those whose families are unable to support them. We must also consider the women who are suffering in silence and have not come forward yet because of the intimate nature of the issue. After hearing of the experiences of others, some women may be embarrassed or just too scared to come forward for fear of being dismissed as a hysterical woman.

At Health questions last week, the Minister said that a NICE update on vaginal mesh implants is expected at the beginning of next year—my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd also mentioned that—but that is too little, too late for the approximately 200 women who will get a vaginal mesh implant on the NHS between now and then and the thousands of women who have already been affected. One of my constituents reached out to me to say that she is worried because she is due to have that surgery soon, and she asked for my advice. Obviously, we cannot give medical advice, so I told her to watch this debate and speak to a surgeon. If there is a chance that a car or an aircraft could cause harm, it would be immediately recalled while the problem was investigated. Why does the precautionary principle not also apply when the health and wellbeing of thousands of women is in jeopardy?

Last week, the Minister said there was not enough evidence to warrant asking the MHRA to reclassify these procedures, but there was so little evidence to justify beginning them in the first place. What exactly is she waiting for? Given what we have heard today, I hope she will recognise the urgent need for action on this issue and justice for those women. I hope she will take these calls back to the Department of Health and ensure that no more women are subject to the risks of vaginal mesh implants. That is why the Opposition are calling for an urgent public inquiry into the number of women adversely affected by vaginal mesh implants and into why the safety of so many women was disregarded.

We urge NHS England and NICE to act immediately to update the guidance and suspend the use of vaginal mesh today. It is our duty to ensure that the failings are understood and corrected so that they never happen again. That should be a matter of urgency for the Minister and the Government, and I trust she will respond positively to these calls.
The advice I have received from the MHRA is that mesh is still the best product for treating stress incontinence, but the evidence regarding recurrence is more mixed. I can give that advice to hon. Members today, but we await the NICE guidelines before the end of the year.

The women are the most important aspect of this debate. We should be focusing on them. We must make sure that they are fully supported to make informed decisions about the surgery, and I have heard from many hon. Members that in many cases they were not. This is a risky process and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Committee, said, many women have benefited from this surgery but there is a risk to it, and those risks were not properly communicated to allow women to make an informed choice. That is not acceptable and we must make sure that does not happen in the future.

To do all of that, we are working with patients, NHS England and the MHRA, to come together with the mesh oversight group. The most recent report was published in July and its recommendations are being implemented. The updated guidelines will be published before the end of 2017. It is important that regulators ensure that advice and guidance keep up with developments in clinical technology and practice. We will constantly review evidence as it comes in to keep advice and guidance up to date.

A number of hon. Members mentioned that there have been no clinical trials for these devices, and I agree that we need to continue to draw on emerging evidence. There have been a number of research studies which have directly informed the guidelines issued by the regulators and led them to reach their conclusions, on which I have just advised the House.

It is still important that we listen to the concerns of women, and I encourage all hon. Members who speak to their constituents suffering with the consequences, to make sure that they report those complaints through the MHRA yellow card scheme, so that we can build a body of evidence about where things have gone wrong.

**Alec Shelbrooke:** Will the Minister make a specific inquiry to the MHRA about the evidence of bacterial infection on the product, which flies in the face of its advice and guidance? Is that indicative of a contradiction in the MHRA’s advice as to how it should be licensing products?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** I hesitate to give a full answer, but the advice I have received is that over the years these products have been reviewed and there are clinical standards for the size of the mesh. I will write to my hon. Friend in more detail, because I am not an expert in that.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle called for a public inquiry. I think it is more important that we get the treatment that is needed, but I encourage everybody to report their cases through the yellow card scheme.

I am horrified to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Tonnes that many women did not know they were having the device fitted in the first place. That generates some concern, and Members today, but we must do all we can to make sure that does not happen in the future.

**Emma Hardy:** I thank everyone who has attended and spoken. I had hoped that my summary would be a little more positive. I am sorry, but the Minister’s response is simply not good enough—at all. I am extremely disappointed. I completely disagree with her: it is about not only the procedure, but the product. I hope that the weight of evidence from all the women involved—all the women who have emailed, all the constituents and all the people who have contacted Sling the Mesh—will be enough to show the Minister that this is more than just procedural; this is about the product.
I also disagree that this is the best treatment for women with urinary incontinence, and I urge the Minister to please look again. I urge men and women around the country to send letters and explain this to the Minister, so that hopefully the weight of emails and letters coming to her doorstep will show that this needs to be looked at again.

I thank all the brave women and men who have raised this issue. I want to reassure them that I will continue to be their voice, and so will the other members of the APPG. My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. We will not let those people down. We will keep pushing until we get a much more satisfactory response to all the problems they have been suffering.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the risks of surgical mesh implants.

Social Security Support for Kinship Carers

11 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered social security support for kinship carers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. There are about 200,000 kinship carers in the UK, three quarters of whom live in poverty. By taking in their relatives’ children they save the state tens of thousands of pounds in care costs and keep families together, often in tragic circumstances. Research suggests that children living in kinship care also have better outcomes than children fostered by non-relatives.

According to a report by the University of Bristol, “Children in kinship care are more likely to have better mental health and behavioural outcomes due to the stability of placements and they are also more likely to preserve their identities through family and community ties.”

Yet although foster carers receive extra support from the state for their efforts, kinship carers are often denied even the bare minimum. According to the Family Rights Group, the majority have to give up work completely or temporarily to look after the children they take in. As a consequence, kinship carers have been disproportionately affected by the benefit cap. They are more likely to be unfairly sanctioned, because of the lack of joined-up working in the state system. For example, their appointments at the jobcentre might be scheduled at the same time as their meetings with a social worker—if they are lucky enough to get a social worker—none of which they are allowed to miss or move.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing a debate on this important issue. She makes an excellent case for the needs of kinship carers. Does she agree that we need to look more generally at the extraordinary contribution that carers make every single day to our society and our economy?

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Indeed, this morning I was contacted by a constituent who has previously been to my office for assistance and who wanted to raise the issue of carers more generally. Her daughter had a brain injury at birth, and 24 years later she is still caring for her. She was keen to ensure that I understood the financial, social and emotional impact of taking on the responsibility of caring for another family member. We must always remember that many people around the country do excellent work in caring for their relatives, and their friends and neighbours in some instances. Too often we forget them and they are an overlooked group in our communities.

Due to reductions in funding to local councils, local authority allowances for carers have been cut. Although foster carers can receive fast-tracked support from social workers or child mental health services, kinship carers usually are left to get with on with it themselves. With regards to the support that does exist for kinship carers, a survey by the Family Rights Group and the Kinship Care Alliance found that 80% of carers do not know enough about the legal options and support that are available to them.
Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She talks about kinship carers not understanding some of the benefits available to them. One of the difficulties that kinship carers face is that often they are grandparents, who would never not take in their grandchildren. However, lots of them have retired so they are not financially ready to take on young children again. I have cases in my constituency where grandparents face having to take equity from their properties to support the grandchildren who are now, in effect, their children. Does she agree that the Government lack understanding of what kinship caring is about? There is a real lack of understanding and support, particularly for older generations of people—grandparents—who are looking after children.

Melanie Onn: Certainly, there is a huge amount of expectation on families to ensure that children are cared for in a family setting. The state should be aware of those people and the support that they deserve should be available. Too often, kinship care arrangements are informal, unofficial and under the radar. Sometimes parents are in crisis situations, some simply cannot cope and in more extreme cases there may be death in the family, and that burden falls on the wider family circle.

Older people who perhaps have retired are caring for members of their family for a second time—in my experience, it is often not the first time that they have done so. They may have looked after their children or other family members in their time, and then face doing that again in their retirement years, which they may have been looking forward to enjoying, free from the responsibility of the school run. Children are incredibly tiring and we tend to forget too easily the burden that is placed on people.

There is a huge amount that I would like the Government to do, not least to address the points that my hon. Friends highlighted in their interventions, to recognise the enormous value of kinship carers and to provide them with the support that they need. However, I want to focus on two measures that the Chancellor could adopt in his Budget next month at very little cost that would have a huge effect on younger carers today. The Minister may already have read the recommendations in the October 2015 Family Rights Group and Kinship Care Alliance report, but if she has not, will she do so? If she feels that my two measures do not go far enough and she would like to do even more, those recommendations would be well worth a read.

In September, I raised the case of my constituent Alyssa at Prime Minister’s questions. Alyssa took responsibility for raising her three younger siblings when their mother passed away four years ago. She was only 18 when she took on the care of her sisters and brother, which is an enormous responsibility for someone of such tender years who is just about to start out on their life journey themselves. She did an absolutely brilliant job, despite the numerous daunting challenges that she faced. She had to work to clear her mum’s debts while looking after her family. Her eldest sister is now in her second year of university, and Alyssa has just started a family of her own with her partner, which is wonderful news.

However, because Alyssa cared for her siblings, she is being denied the Sure Start maternity grant and child tax credits. She is missing out on up to about £3,000 a year in total. When the Government restricted the Sure Start maternity grant to a family’s first child, they reasoned that families could reuse the equipment that the grant helps to purchase, such as prams, toys and clothes. I do not think that Ministers really considered that some carers take children into their care after infancy, so they never had clothes, prams or bottles to begin with.

It seems to me that Alyssa’s case is an anomaly in policy—an unintended consequence of the one-child limit on Sure Start and the two-child limit on child tax credits—but she is not a one-off. Another constituent contacted me recently to say that his wife had taken on her sister’s two children a few years ago after she passed away. He and his wife are now expecting their first child, and they, too, will not be entitled to tax credits for their own child. If they had already claimed tax credits for a child of their own and had later put in a claim for her nieces, that would have been accepted and all the children would have been eligible for tax credits. The Government included an exemption for kinship carers in the Welfare Reform Act 2012, but I just do not think that they realised that the exemption did not cover all cases.

Lisa from Grimsby took care of her 18-month-old nephew five years ago. He was diagnosed with global developmental delay—autism—and has an extra Y chromosome. His mother’s mental health issues meant that she was unable to meet his care needs, which only increased as he got older, so Lisa and her husband eventually both gave up work to look after him. That is another example of the financial hardship that kinship carers often face. When they had a child of their own this year, they were denied the the Sure Start maternity grant. Unfortunately, it is all too tempting for Governments to take kinship carers for granted, allowing them to make enormous sacrifices and raise children who are not their own, without offering them the support they need and deserve.

It is unknown how many carers are or will be affected by these policies, because the Government do not measure that. However, a survey by the Family Rights Group suggests that 25% of kinship carers have both their birth children and kin children living with them, and about one in five—up to 40,000—carers has three or more children living with them. As the one-child and one-child limits are not applied retrospectively, a small fraction of that number will be affected by this issue.

The number will be growing every year, but we are talking about a small amount in cost terms to extend the exemptions for kinship carers to those who have children of their own after taking kin children into their care. That small cost would be of huge benefit to kinship carers, like those in my constituency who are sacrificing a massive amount to do the right thing and give children a loving home within their family.

I am calling on the Government to ensure that kinship carers are eligible for child tax credits and the Sure Start maternity grant when they have children of their own. I asked the Prime Minister about Alyssa’s case on 13 September and she asked me to write to her about it. I sent her a letter that day, and I sent another letter with more information on 3 October after Alyssa’s appeal for the maternity grant was rejected, but as I mentioned before, I still have not received a reply. I hope the Minister will be much more forthcoming in how she plans to deal with these anomalies in the law so that kinship carers are no longer penalised for the amazing work they do.
11.11 am  

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this important debate on social security support for kinship carers. She has raised a number of important issues and I am glad that she has taken the opportunity to highlight the invaluable work that kinship carers do. They truly are the unsung heroes, stepping in and offering care to children when they most need it.

Let me start by assuring the hon. Lady that the Government acknowledge the immense value of care given by kinship carers, be they family or friends looking after children whose parents are unable to provide the necessary care themselves, or non-parent carers supporting children who would otherwise be in local authority care. As she said, they save the public purse an awful lot of money; but more than that, the value of the stability and care that they give is probably immeasurable. A number of the issues she raised in passing, as well as the Family Rights Group and Kinship Care Alliance report that she referred to, cover a multitude of Departments. I will take a closer look at that report and recommend it to my colleagues from across different Departments.

I am grateful that the hon. Lady raised the specific issues of some of her constituents and others. Those individuals, through the selfless gesture that they make, play such a vital role in ensuring that children are raised in a caring family: an environment that gives them the stability they need to grow and develop. As a society, we owe them a massive debt of gratitude. In particular, she raised the story of her constituent, Alyssa, who raised three of her siblings from a very young age, and I understand that she gave up her own studies to do that. She has clearly done a remarkable job, given that one is now making her own way through university. She should be the subject of all our praise and thanks for that enormous act of self-sacrifice at such a young age—it must have been terrifying for her.

The Government work to ensure that the role of kinship carers is recognised and supported by ensuring access to the same support as parents within the benefits system in relation to child benefit, universal credit, child tax credits and other means-tested benefits. I am sure the hon. Lady will understand that the benefits administered by the Department for Work and Pensions are designed to try to suit the majority of claimants and cannot always be tailored to every individual circumstance, as that would introduce difficult and often subjective decisions into what are intended to be simple, streamlined schemes. However, I assure her that the Government recognise that there are times when the rules may not seem to have the flexibility that one would want, and this is clearly one of those times.

The hon. Lady has raised a number of important issues. This is something I will look more closely at and, as with all our policies, the Department will continue to keep the policy under review.

With regard to the Sure Start maternity grant, payment is restricted to just the one child under 16 in the family. We believe it is important to focus support where it is needed most. That is why we took that decision. The expenses related to the first child—buying all the necessary paraphernalia that come with a baby—are usually greater than those for subsequent children. That means that kinship carers of children under the age of 16 who then have their first baby are usually not eligible for the grant for that baby. However, as the hon. Lady rightly said, the circumstances of kinship carers vary, and it is not possible to legislate for every specific circumstance. As she highlighted, sometimes children taken into kinship care are not infants and did not come with all the necessary baby bits and bobs. That is why I take on board very much what she said and am happy to look at the issues she raised to do with that specific circumstance.

The hon. Lady also raised the Government’s policy to limit tax credits to two children. I would like quickly to touch on the rationale for the policy to provide support for a maximum of two children, as that might help to explain its impact on kinship carers as well as other claimants. As we know, a benefits structure that adjusts automatically to family size is not fair on families supporting themselves solely through work, who do not usually see their incomes rise when they have more children. We know that households need to think carefully about whether they are financially prepared to support an additional child without relying on income-related benefits. The Government’s view is that providing support to a maximum of two children or qualifying young persons in universal credit and child tax credit will ensure fairness between claimants on the one hand and, on the other, those taxpayers who support themselves solely through work. We believe that all children should be treated equally, and the decision to have more children should be taken based on whether the claimant can afford to support additional children.

However, I must stress that the Government recognise that some parents and carers are not able to make choices about the number of children in their family, and kinship carers often step up to the plate unexpectedly. That is why we have developed a number of exceptions for third and subsequent children to the maximum support on entitlement. One of those exceptions applies to parents who already have two children in their household and make the selfless decision to take on the responsibility of kinship care for children who would otherwise be at risk of entering the care system.

Claimants will still be entitled to an additional amount for any disabled children, regardless of the total number of children in the household. It is also worth noting that tax-free childcare is available to households where all parents are earning at least the equivalent of 16 hours at the national minimum wage per week. Households can receive support for any number of eligible children from age zero to 12, or to age 17 where the child is disabled. Child benefit will continue to be paid regardless of family size, as that is the basis of the Government’s contribution towards the cost of bringing up a child.

I reassure the hon. Lady that the Government recognise the pivotal role played by kinship carers. Our welfare policies are designed to ensure fairness between families supporting themselves solely through work and those on income-related benefits and to support those most in need. She has raised a number of important issues and the Department will give the policies discussed today and their impact on kinship carers every consideration.

Question put and agreed to.

11.19 am  

Sitting suspended.
Taxes on Small Businesses

[Ms Nadine Dorries in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the effect of taxes on small businesses.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue, which affects small businesses in west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, in the constituency of St Ives.

Some 87% of business enterprises in my west Cornwall constituency are classed as microbusinesses, meaning that they employ fewer than 10 people. In fact, 99% of all businesses in my constituency are small and medium-sized enterprises, employing fewer than 250 workers. Those small, locally run businesses provide the lion’s share of jobs and are the drivers of our local economy. If that is true in St Ives, it will be true elsewhere in the country, which is why understanding how the tax system helps or hinders small business is so important and why I am pleased to raise the issue today. It is also why I have dedicated a considerable amount of time since being elected in 2015 to meeting small businesses and understanding the issues facing them. In fact, I had a small business of my own until my election in 2015.

I know that this Conservative Government recognise the considerable contribution of small businesses, and I acknowledge and appreciate the work that has been done to address the tax burden and support small employers. Many of the 3 million jobs created since 2010 are within small businesses, which is, in part, a credit to Government policy. I recognise that there is no shortage of priorities for the Government and that navigating our way out of the EU will be time-consuming, to say the least. Despite that and—dare I say it—because of it, if there was ever a time to radically address the way businesses are taxed, it is now. While reform will be a challenge, it will undoubtedly yield benefits for our economy by improving productivity, driving wage growth, boosting full-time employment and spreading wealth across all corners of Great Britain, which is a particular concern and interest of people in the far west of Cornwall.

Time does not permit us to consider every aspect of business taxation, and I am not gifted with the brain that is needed fully to understand the complexities of the issue. However, I wish to cover three tax-related issues that stand out to me as clear opportunities for the Government to remove barriers for small business and demonstrate an understanding and recognition of the life of a small business owner.

The first issue is the VAT threshold. Small business owners in coastal communities such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly choose to curtail their business to duck under the VAT threshold of £85,000. That is not necessarily about tax avoidance, but more a desire to avoid another level of administration. One business owner on Scilly contacted me because the gallery she runs is set to cross the VAT threshold. She will then have to raise prices by 20% to break even. Since only one of the gallery’s 50 artists is VAT registered, being able to claim back VAT would not compensate for that change. The gallery must either take the leap and accept that burden or close for the rest of the season.

The effect of the stifling VAT threshold in my constituency is reduced activity during shoulder and winter months, reduced employment opportunities, reduced Government tax income, depressed town centre activity and greater pressure on the hospitality sector during peak season. A guest house owner wanting to avoid registering for VAT may also choose to close early, reducing the availability of beds for visitors and removing altogether the potential spend of the visitor within the wider community.

I raise that issue now because leaving the EU presents an opportunity for the Treasury to consider raising the threshold to, for the sake of argument, £120,000. The Isles of Scilly would be a great place to look at if the Treasury wanted to assess the possible impacts and implications of such a change. The Government may find that it is a cost-neutral proposal.

Another benefit of that proposal is the potential to create greater job opportunities and encourage fresh blood into the tourism sector. That is particularly relevant in Cornwall, Scilly and other rural areas across the UK that struggle to retain young people. I am not suggesting that the proposal would address the skills gap entirely in remote and rural areas, but it would be a step in the right direction.

I assure the Minister and everyone here today that the need to address the VAT threshold in coastal communities is regularly brought to my attention by business owners. I am interested to hear if the Minister is minded to consider such a proposal and possibly a pilot in the constituency of St Ives.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is a very complex matter. I was doing some research on it and found that 59% of homes now own a tablet, 71% of UK adults have a smartphone and 97% of small and medium-sized businesses have access to online services. I make a plea to the Minister on behalf of craftspeople—people who know nothing about computers but everything about their hands. The person who has a computer in their house is probably a 13-year-old—

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Mr Shannon, please keep it to an intervention, not a speech.

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that point is not fully taken into consideration when it comes to the digitalisation of everything?

Derek Thomas: If the hon. Gentleman is happy to wait, I will be pleased to address that issue later.

I will move on to business rates, which have been quite a contentious and well-documented issue in recent months. There is no doubt in my mind that if the Treasury were inventing a taxation system from scratch today, the current business rate system would not feature in its proposals. The Government should scrap the current system of business rates and develop a fresh solution, injecting fairness into the tax system for small businesses and taking into account the growth of online shopping and supermarket home delivery services.

Structurally, there are many things wrong with business rates. The tax bears little or no relation to the success or activity of a business. The method used to calculate it is arbitrary. Colleagues will be aware that rates are calculated by multiplying the rateable value, based on the assumed
rental value of the property, by a multiplier set by Government. Almost in recognition of that, and in an attempt to spare small businesses the business rate burden, the 2010 Conservative-led coalition and the two successive Conservative Governments have sought to address the problems associated with business rates. As a result, some businesses are eligible for rate relief, with many paying no rates at all. Others, for reasons that are beyond the understanding of most lay people, find they are charged 100% business rates, with many in my constituency experiencing considerable increases following the revaluations earlier this year.

The owner of a small independent delicatessen in Helston, where rents are relatively lower, approached me for help in March. Her current rateable value stands at an extortionate £17,750 per year. To rub salt into the wound, her rates are calculated as £49 per square metre, which is the second highest on the street. A chain bakery operating next door pays just £101 per square metre—32% less—and a national clothing chain on the other side of the street pays just £66 per square metre, which is over 56% less. If she enjoyed the same rate per square metre, she would be liable for no rates whatsoever. Because of her business rate charge, she is not sure that she can afford to stay in business.

The current business rate calculations unfairly discriminate even between businesses in the same part of the high street and do not enable businesses to operate on a level playing field. The great tragedy is that that example is not unique. There are similar cases of an independent photography shop in Penzance and a car paint-spraying business that is run by two youngsters who find that their business rate charge bears no comparison to similar units on the same industrial estate. In both instances, there is little hope for the businesses unless the Government act quickly.

Furthermore, in this age of online shopping and supermarket home delivery services, there are businesses essential to the health of the high street that find competing in today’s world nigh on impossible, despite their so-called privileged position on the high street. Historically, a place on the high street gave an advantage to the shop owner, and consequently the business rate levy reflected that. The ability of supermarkets to provide a delivery service direct to the door has undermined that advantage, and in many cases, despite the modern reach of supermarkets as a result of home delivery services, the supermarket pays relatively less in business rates than the high street shopkeeper. In fact, in St Ives, business rates for some supermarkets reduced this April.

To add insult to injury, rents in St Ives town are being pushed up by the perceived popularity of this iconic place. This year, because rate charges relate to rental values, independent business owners have seen their business rate charge rocket. Traditional retailers, such as bakers, butchers and grocers, face the risk of closing after decades of trading. High street chains move in, and ironically the very thing that drives visitors to St Ives is being lost, partly because of what I believe is a flawed business rate system.

Could it be that the cost of running a high street business, including a business rate charge, means that a greengrocer can no longer compete with a supermarket 20 miles away, now that it can deliver groceries to the family living in the flat above? Surely a modern-day business tax should recognise such changes in consumer behaviour. Furthermore, business rate charges take no account of external factors such as high parking charges, poor upkeep of the local area, closure of local public toilets, or a downturn in the economy, most of which have been experienced in Cornwall in recent years.

I have worked hard with a number of business owners who have found the business rate system profoundly challenging. That group includes a local pub owner, who came to the trade recently, full of enthusiasm. The pub employs 14 locals and is a focal point for the community. A rate review means that the pub now faces a 280% increase in business rates, which equates to an extra £13,000 a year. I recognise that the Government have done some work, and Cornwall Council is also doing some work, to help with that, but the fact remains that that rural pub owner’s rates have increased by 280%. As rural pubs close around us and communities are losing their rural services, issues such as this are hardly encouraging to new entrants.

Another major drawback is that business rates hinder aspiration. Should a small business benefiting from full rate relief wish to take on a second property, expanding both the business and the workforce, it will lose its rate relief and pay rates on both the new and the existing outlet. That step change discourages growth and innovation, and stifles all the benefits that growth brings, including job opportunities, staff training and career progression. That is hardly the intention of what I believe is a small business-friendly Conservative Government.

Before moving on, I want to stress the potentially unique role that traditional independent retailers such as bakers, butchers and grocers have in looking out for vulnerable people in the community—for example, the elderly. That is reason indeed to consider the potentially devastating impact of an outdated business rate system.

Finally, I would like to address the Government’s Making Tax Digital plan. I am in favour of moving across to digital tax reporting and I recognise the Government’s ambition to move to a fully digital tax system during the next few years. Will the Minister ensure that SMEs, including sole traders, have easy access to reliable software and training? Have the Government considered that for some businesses, a transition to digital-only tax will present a further serious administrative and financial burden? Strange as it may seem, there are still significant numbers of traders who are not naturally acquainted with online activity. I am reluctant to single out individuals, but I have met a number of sole traders who are not tech savvy, and the idea of making tax digital fills them with dread.

At present, I can see that there may be a benefit to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs in making tax digital, and I know that the Government are making allowances for areas of poor digital connectivity and plan to exempt some on very low self-employed incomes. Can the Minister please ensure that those exceptions are properly supported by accurate data, so that those who are not yet in a position to take part in the brave new world of digital tax reporting will not be unfairly penalised or discriminated against?

In conclusion, I believe that the Government could send a clear message that Brexit does not mean that important domestic priorities are being left on the back burner. The Government can do that by ensuring that...
small business growth is not stifled by out-of-date and grossly unfair tax systems. Taxation must promote growth so that, as a nation and within our communities, we can maximise all the benefits that a vibrant economy brings. As changes in consumer behaviour and better digital services lead consumers to gravitate towards online shopping and supermarket home delivery, we must ensure that the Government have a fair system of taxation and make changes to unlock the potential of our country’s entrepreneurial small businesses.

The Government must recognise that the negative impact of business rates and the profit hit from VAT registration often go hand in hand. Both taxes kick in at the crucial point when an enterprise is on the cusp of growing to a size at which it can be of useful benefit to the local economy and community. Will the Government please consider scrapping business rates once and for all, in favour of a tax that reflects the economic activity of all businesses concerned? Will the Government explore opportunities to raise the VAT threshold in coastal and rural tourist areas, and will the Government continue to listen carefully to those who recognise the move towards digital tax reporting but ask that we approach it with caution and understanding?

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Ms Dorries, I withdrew my name this morning.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Well, it is still on my list. We will go to Robert Jenrick.

2.45 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for bringing this matter to the House’s attention. It is an incredibly important subject.

Like a number of hon. Members in the Chamber today, I came to the House having run a business. Not only was I involved in running businesses, but more importantly, I grew up—indeed, spent most of my life from the age of four—involved to a greater or lesser extent in a family business. Having seen a business founded and run from a kitchen table and known that the roof above your head was on the line when the cash flow was short or times were difficult gives you a respect for small business people and entrepreneurs that never leaves you. That helped to forge my politics and make me a Conservative, because it is the Conservative party that has always respected small business and sought to use what levers we have, including the tax system, to incentivise small business people and entrepreneurs, to reward enterprise and to focus enterprise on the things that really matter, not just for them but for the benefit of everyone—the whole of society. I am talking about innovation, research, development and building a vibrant economy that works for everyone.

I want to talk about a few of the tax changes that have been made since the Government first came to power in 2010, which I know, from the small businesses that I speak to in my constituency, and from talking to the businesses that I have been involved in and even my own family business, have made a huge difference. There are the obvious ones to the headline taxes that we have made such a big issue of over the years. I am thinking of the reduction in corporation tax, which has fallen to 19% and will fall again to 17%. That is an incredibly important, landmark reduction in taxes that affects, of course, big businesses and corporations, but also small businesses that prosper—the directors, founders and shareholders want to see a reward for their hard work. That tax would go up under Labour. The Labour party’s manifesto, or the small print of it at least, said that the small profits tax—for those below £30,000—would rise to 21% in 2020-21.

Capital gains tax is another tax that we have reduced. We increased it initially, at the beginning of the coalition Government, and then accepted that we had made a mistake and brought it down again. We have not brought it to as low a level as applied under the last Labour Government, but we have brought it down, which benefits businesses of all kinds. I would be very concerned if a change in Government led to its rising again.

However, taxes that get far less publicity in the main political debate are perhaps my priority. I am talking about those that, in the long term, benefit innovation, investment and research and development. The most obvious one that I have seen succeed is the research and development tax credit. That tax credit enables businesses large and small to claim back against profits, following the latest development, an extra 130% of their qualifying costs. That was on top of the 100% that we had had in the past, meaning a 230% tax credit for research and development by a business. In fact, there is a tax credit even if there is a loss by that business. That is incredibly generously defined and implemented by the Treasury, particularly for small businesses. Businesses involved in manufacturing—like the business that I have been involved in, through my family, for many years—with a high research and development capability, can usually see tax bills as low as 10%. In fact, it is unusual for a business like that—an SME manufacturing business—to have a tax bill above 10%. That is incredibly important because those are the businesses that, across the House, we care about and want to succeed in this country.

The patent box regime introduced by the last Chancellor of the Exchequer for corporation tax relief is incredibly important. It has led to tax reductions for all businesses that develop new products in manufacturing, software and other areas, and has been generously defined so that SMEs can access it and benefit from it without needing the finest lawyers or tax accountants. The innovative businesses that we want to prosper in our constituencies would struggle to pay more than 10% tax as a result of corporation tax, R and D tax credits and the patent box regime. I am concerned that a future Labour Government would abolish those incredibly important reliefs. Will the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), comment on the Labour party’s position on the reliefs that businesses the length and breadth of the country rely on?

Entrepreneurs’ relief has increased the lifetime limit on gains for entrepreneurs, which I think was £1 million when we came into government, to £10 million—a lot of money to almost anyone, and certainly to people in my Nottinghamshire constituency. Entrepreneurs of any scale can use that relief to ensure that their lifetime’s hard work—the business that they have built up—can be used for their pension or passed on to the next generation. Someone who owns a business, whether it is a highly
successful tech business worth tens of millions or a florist’s in Newark that they have devoted their entire life to, can be sure that when they sell it, they will gain the benefit. Enterprise and hard work have their reward. Above all, the entrepreneurs we care about most in society—the ones who do not take out the profits but reinvest them in their business—can have the confidence that they will be able to use that business in retirement as their pension or nest egg. I ask the shadow Minister what the Labour party intends to do about that relief.

For seven years, we have worked hard to close loopholes that were exploited by private equity and others to direct those funds to people that none of us in this House would want them to go to. We want to ensure that genuine entrepreneurs have the confidence not to take out money from their business, which they could easily do when it becomes successful, but to continue to reinvest it and to ensure that that business succeeds. Reinvestment involves employing more people, expanding, creating new opportunities and driving the economy forward. We should be proud of entrepreneurs’ relief and promote it to entrepreneurs, whatever the size of their business, in our constituency.

Although we have cut corporation tax to the lowest level imposed in any major developed economy, the level of business property taxes is still among the highest in the OECD, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives. I agree with him about the effect of business property taxes, not just on the obvious business owners, such as shopkeepers in the small market towns of Newark and Southwell, but on start-ups; on businesses that need a workshop or retail outlet before they build a presence online; on offices; on manufacturers who want factory space; and on businesses making their first expansion by purchasing new sites and renting new premises. Those businesses suffer most from this, and the Treasury should do further work to understand how we can move into the 21st century. Business is going online and we need a level playing field.

All these lower taxes for businesses are in the debit column, but there are some items in the credit column. The introduction of the national living wage means that the living wage continues to rise and working people are better supported, we need low taxes on the other side—corporation tax, capital gains tax, entrepreneurs’ relief, the patent box regime. We need the balance to work in favour of entrepreneurs and risk-takers—the businessmen and businesswomen of this country. That is why we should be deeply concerned about a Labour Government, who would not only follow our lead on social reform and treating workers as they should be treated, but risk diminishing and undermining the tax reforms and reductions that small businesses have come to rely on. That would put the enterprising people of all our constituencies at great risk. Enterprise should have its reward. I believe the Conservative party will always provide that reward for the hard-working constituents we represent.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. It is appropriate etiquette for any Member who wishes to speak to rise and catch my eye. Is Mr Davies the only remaining Member who wishes to speak?

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): I call Mr Courts.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I welcome the chance to speak in this important debate, which I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing. I declare at the outset my membership of the all-party group on small and micro business, and my practice at the Bar, both of which have a clear bearing on the debate. I also refer hon. Members to my entry on the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

There is no doubt that small businesses are the drivers of our economy—the agile, risk-taking job creators. It is no exaggeration to say that they are the very fabric of our society. That is never clearer than when I walk around my constituency of Witney and west Oxfordshire and see many hundreds of brilliant examples of small businesses that have started from scratch in small premises. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) says, many of them start around a kitchen table. I recently launched the West Oxfordshire Business Awards, at which I saw some fantastic examples of such businesses. They make the importance of small business crystal clear.

It is essential that we continue to work towards a low-tax economy. I entirely concur with my hon. Friend about this Conservative Government’s attitude to support for small businesses and the low-tax economy they have fostered. I thank them for it. There is no doubt that the burdens of taxation on small businesses are significant: it is estimated that they spend about £3,600 per year and three hours per month on administering the tax burden and complying with its obligations. It is incumbent on us to reduce those obligations to as limited a level as realistically possible. The chief culprits are VAT, corporation tax, income tax and PAYE.

Making Tax Digital is a key plank of the Government’s agenda. I freely confess that when I practised at the Bar before being elected to Parliament, I did not hugely look forward to filling in my annual tax return or my quarterly VAT return, so I was not wildly enthusiastic about the prospect of doing either more frequently. Setting aside that immediate reaction, once the system has bedded in and people have got used to it, it will clearly make it easier in the long run for small businesses and microbusinesses—as well as sole traders like me—to do tax returns online and more frequently, rather than in a massive chunk at the end of the year.
I welcome Making Tax Digital, and I think its benefits need to be explained to all businesses, but I ask the Government to ensure that complying with it is not an onerous burden for small businesses. Chief among my concerns are training and software. I make a plea that the software be fully tested before digital taxation is rolled out, so that it works smoothly and unintentional difficulties are not introduced. I also applaud the amended timetable that was laid out in July; I think it was the Minister who is here today who did that. Clearly the Government have listened to some of the concerns that have been expressed by small businesses and that amendment will assist them greatly.

I welcome the national living wage and the start of auto-enrolment for pensions. Those measures have done so much under this Conservative Government to help the lowest paid in our society and to ensure that people have planned for a successful, safe and financially secure retirement; they are much to the Government’s credit. However, there is an impact upon small businesses, especially those with lower margins and those for whom the staff costs—childcare, social care and so on—are particularly high.

I ask the Government and the Minister just to consider whether they might be able to support employers further by looking at increasing the employment allowance, simply because that is something that companies tend to use to put into investment in technology, hiring more staff or raising wages. The small business community would welcome such an increase.

It would not be right for me to make a speech in this debate without mentioning business rates, which of course are a major concern to many small businesses. Again, when I walk around my constituency—including the streets of Witney, Burford and Chipping Norton—and see the wonderful small businesses that are so unique, I am reminded how important it is that we never reach a situation in which we have identikit high streets and essentially the same chains populating towns.

I thank the Government for having listened to the concerns expressed earlier this year with regard to the discretionary relief fund—the £300 million that was produced and given to local authorities. I pay tribute to my council, West Oxfordshire District Council, which is well on its way to distributing the help that has been given by central Government to local Government. I would like to make it quite clear at this stage that there is good evidence in Witney that that help has made a real difference and saved some businesses that might otherwise have been unable to cope. So, as I say, I thank the Government for that.

However, I have some concerns about the administration that is involved in any business rates system, particularly with regard to the valuation office. A constituent has been locked for four years in an unresolved dispute over the valuation of their property. The layers of bureaucracy, which are confusing enough for those of us who regularly deal with these matters on a casework basis, are particularly challenging for small businesses. I would like to see a quicker and more efficient appeal process for the purposes of business rates valuation.

I will just say a few words about the online environment, which I know the Government are working on. An incredible world exists for us now. When we are sitting here having made our speeches, we can order things online—all sorts of products from all over the world. Gone are the days of needing to visit another country to get their products; we can get their products brought here to us. That is extraordinary but there is a real issue when small businesses, such as those I have referred to, that are trading from brick and mortar premises are up against large companies that are not paying the same business rates because of their obvious lack of such a physical presence. It is very difficult to compete against those companies, and likewise against the larger multinationals or nationals who can more easily absorb the costs, the bureaucracy and of course the taxation that is involved. I know that the Government are aware of that and that they are doing something about it; I simply flag it as something that is very important for small businesses.

We must also remember that there is an element of choice for consumers, and that it is incumbent upon all of us to spread the word among our constituents about the brilliant small businesses that we have in our local area. In my constituency there is a great local bookshop in Woodstock. Well, if we want to have that shop, or the florist in Witney, we need to go in there and buy things, and not buy everything from Amazon. Those shops need to be there and we need to support them and actively make that choice. And let us not forget what such shops can give, because there is the real customer service—the care and dedication—that one gets from businesses that their owners really feel about, when they have set them up from their own kitchen table and grown and sustained them through their own blood, sweat and labour.

I will conclude by saying that as we leave the European Union we have an extraordinary opportunity to make Britain the most business-friendly environment in the world—the best place to start the small businesses that really are the lifeblood of our local economies. I am entirely confident that that British entrepreneurial spirit will ensure that we continue to thrive outside the European Union and make the most of those global opportunities that are there for the taking.

However, we all need to continue to ensure that we have the business-friendly environment that encourages and unlocks the talent that we have, which means a low-tax and low-regulation environment, to make sure that our local businesses not only continue to survive but continue to thrive. I know that is the case under this Conservative Government, and I applaud all activities in that regard and in that direction.

3.4 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Thank you, Ms Dorries, for calling me to speak in this debate and, indeed, for your generosity in doing so after I was a couple of minutes late in arriving.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on bringing this matter forward for debate. I took great interest in his comments about business rates. I cannot say a great deal about business rates, because they are a devolved matter in Wales and it would not be appropriate for me to speak about their effect in Wales here in Westminster. However, I must say that the dramatic changes in terms of revaluation really have put the most horrendous pressure on some of the most important businesses in my constituency.
The one issue that I will raise today is VAT on tourism. It is not a new issue; it has been discussed many times before. However, I want to make sure that it stays on the Treasury’s to-do list, so I have come along to this debate to talk about the impact of that tax on small business.

In Montgomeryshire, and I am sure in most rural areas of Britain, tourism is a massively important industry and a hugely important part of the local economy. Very often, the competition to an area such as my constituency is from overseas. In a lot of overseas countries, which people can choose to go to for their holidays or to visit for a day or a week, the level of VAT is much lower than it is here. The differences might be measured in relatively small amounts of money, but the point is that it is competition and other countries can advertise by saying that they have a lower level of VAT than Britain. The impact of our level of VAT is negative and it is particularly damaging to rural areas that depend on tourism.

As for my constituency, a lot of people know about Powis castle, Lake Vyrnwy and the Lake Vyrnwy hotel, which is a huge attraction, as well as the Montgomeryshire canal and the Welshpool to Llanfair light railway. Those things are why people come and very often they are the reason people come to Montgomeryshire to set up all sorts of businesses. The point that I am making is that tourism is massively important to my constituency, and I am sure that the same is true of every other rural part of Britain.

As I have said, the issue of VAT on tourism, which is at 20% in Britain, has been under discussion for many years and addressing it has been very much part of the work of the all-party group on the tourism and hospitality industry in Wales. Lowering it is one of our major campaigns and has been for a long time. The ambition is to make certain that VAT on tourism is not forgotten. Addressing this issue needs to be part of the Treasury’s considerations.

It would be very enjoyable for me if the Minister stood up today and said that in the Budget in November, the Chancellor will say that he is contemplating a cut in VAT on tourism, but I am not absolutely sure that that will happen. However, it is important that we keep this issue as a consideration for the future. I know it is not a straightforward issue, and that there may well be administrative costs and that we could be accused of having different levels of VAT. We need to know what the benefit to businesses would be of lowering VAT on tourism. Instinctively, we believe there will be a benefit when the competition is lower, but we need to know what that benefit might be.

What I am asking for more than anything else is that the Treasury keeps this issue under consideration, and that we have a proper understanding of and a continuing inquiry into what the benefits of any VAT cut would be, because as we leave the European Union, the freedom to take decisions relating to VAT will change things; it will give us a lot more freedom. Something that I would like to do as a celebration of our leaving the European Union and the ensuing freedom that we will have to vary our VAT is to announce that we are either removing or greatly reducing VAT on tourism in Britain. The economic benefits of doing so would be huge and I hope that it is something the Treasury will keep under consideration.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be called so early in the debate this afternoon, Ms Dorries. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing such an important debate. He spoke passionately about constituency interests and local businesses that are affected.

The hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) presented his personal experience of tax on SMEs and talked about the importance of supporting innovation and enterprise, which I will talk about a little. The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) talked about what he saw as the opportunities presented by Brexit. I do not necessarily share his optimism for the next couple of years, but we will see what happens. Time will tell on that one. As far as I am concerned, it is important to reinforce that Brexit is a real threat to small business, and we should do everything we can to avoid a hard Brexit. I know from speaking to trade organisations across the UK that their members are genuinely worried about what Brexit—or, even worse, a no-deal Brexit—will mean for their small businesses.

The Scottish Government recognise the importance of SMEs and are taking action to support them with initiatives such as the £500-million Scottish growth scheme to target high-growth, innovative and export-focused SMEs, which will clearly need as much support as they can get after March 2019. In June the Scottish Government announced the first tranche of the Scottish growth scheme, aiming to stimulate more than £200 million of investment to help small businesses grow, and they will make a further investment this year. Alongside additional private sector investment, we expect that to provide more than £100 million to innovative, high-growth companies. Scottish Government funding for new business research and development projects is also increasing, with an additional £45 million being invested over the next three years.

Various Members have mentioned VAT on tourism. The hon. Members for St Ives, for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has left the Chamber, mentioned the tourist tax. I have just come from the Royal National Mòd, which is being held this year in Lochaber around the Fort William area. The area is the outdoor capital of the UK, and definitely of Scotland. The area is poised and ready for expansion. The opportunities for tourism are unique. Ben Nevis is on its doorstep and there are all sorts of activities available from white-water rafting to low and high-level walking. One issue that crops up time and again is VAT on tourism. If that could be brought into line with other EU countries, we could see much greater investment and real expansion in the area.

Business rates were mentioned by most Members. The Scottish Government’s small business scheme has removed the rates burden entirely from 100,000 premises across Scotland and we will urgently take forward the Barclay review recommendations on non-domestic rates. More than half of our rateable properties are paying nothing this year, and more than 70% of Scottish properties are paying the same or less in 2017-18 than they did last year. That is making a difference to small businesses across Scotland. Additionally, all rate payers in Scotland have the right of appeal against the independent assessor’s determination of rateable value, which is free to do in Scotland, unlike in the rest of the UK.
We believe a simplified tax code would pave the way for a significant boost in tax yield. The UK has one of the most complex tax codes, which is often guilty of creating an uneven playing field for our businesses and workers, as well as creating loopholes that disproportionately aid and assist the wealthy and powerful. The hon. Member for Witney talked about the amount of time that had to be spent on completing tax returns, which is a big issue for small businesses.

We broadly support the transition to digital taxation, but we have a series of concerns regarding its implementation, particularly for small businesses and specifically around the impact of digital taxation on low technologically advanced businesses, businesses in rural areas with restricted access to the internet, and small businesses generally that perhaps do not have the skills required to deal with it.

As we face Brexit and the challenges that that will pose for our small business community, the UK Government must do more to support small businesses, which are the backbone of our economy, and I urge the Minister to look seriously at the issue of VAT on tourism that has been raised by several Members this afternoon.

3.15 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship today, Ms Dorries. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for initiating this important debate. We all recognise that small businesses are the backbone of our economy. Most of us have a family member involved in a small business. They might work for or own a small business, or they might be a partner in a small business, so I would not like people to get the idea that the Labour party is distanced from small business. We are not; we are right in the heart of the small business community. The question is whether the Government have neglected the needs of small business in favour, for example, of tax breaks to big business that has failed to stimulate investment and create the high-skilled, well-paid jobs that the country needs. We have record employment but, as I have said in the past, the issue is not just about the quantity of jobs but the quality. I do not demean the number of jobs that have been created, but there has to be a balance.

Under the Conservatives, productivity trails behind our international rivals and British businesses are struggling to recruit the skilled workers they need. The Government have failed to invest in the infrastructure that businesses depend on and have presided over what amounts to a skills crisis. The approach we have seen from Ministers on business rates revaluation is only one example of the chaos at the heart of the Government. Their approach to business rates revaluation has created a huge and destabilising burden for many businesses, with many facing a substantial and unfair increase, which other Members have alluded to. Discretionary funds are helpful, but they do not solve the underlying problem. All that is in advance of the issue that the continued uncertainty around the Government’s approach to Brexit negotiations is creating in the UK business community, whether small or large.

Such uncertainty has led many businesses to delay investing in their people or capital, which is having the unintended effect of undermining the economy’s long-term prospects. No wonder optimism among small firms and businesses has tumbled to its lowest level in the wake of the referendum and the unprecedented political and economic uncertainty that we face. What we do about it is a different matter, but that is what we face, and that is the environment that people and small businesses operate in.

According to the Federation of Small Businesses’ small business index, a majority of small and medium-sized businesses report that operating costs have risen compared with the same period last year. Labour costs are up, taxation is up and rent is up, and all are frequently mentioned as problems. On top of that, the Government are out of kilter—I will go no further than that—in relation to Making Tax Digital. Stakeholders, including tax experts and accountants—we have discussed this previously—have queried the Government’s implementation date as well as the added cost that will be passed on to small and medium-sized businesses. I take the point made by the hon. Member who said, “You get used to it,” but to be fair, at what point do you have to get used to it?

What we might call the U-turn, or about-face, that the Government made during the summer, under the Minister’s auspices, scaling back plans for Making Tax Digital, was welcome. It pushed back the implementation date to 2019, ensuring an exemption for small businesses below the VAT threshold, and ensuring that businesses do not have to submit quarterly tax returns just yet. I do not criticise that; it is welcome. However, despite that volte-face there is still, in our opinion and that of many others, an impact on small businesses; an example is the unrealistic 2019 implementation date for Making Tax Digital for VAT. That date would mean that SMEs were expected to deal with the added costs and complications of digitalising their tax returns at the same time as having to deal with the added costs of Britain’s leaving the European Union. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) thinks that is a good thing and he is entitled to his opinion, but that is not necessarily everyone’s view.

There is also huge uncertainty over whether businesses and HMRC will be ready to implement Making Tax Digital by 2019, and we must take that into account. Perhaps the Government’s implementation timetable has more to do with the lacuna in the public finances. I do not know; I pose the question. According to HMRC, Making Tax Digital will raise £2.1 billion for the Treasury, although the Minister may tell me that that is not the correct figure. That money has probably already been spent; whether it is raised is a different kettle of fish. That is another factor for small businesses to take into account.

The truth is that the Conservatives are not the only party for small businesses. In fact, one could argue that in the past few years they have rewarded larger companies with tax cuts at the expense of SMEs. As to tax avoidance, over the past month we have seen the same story play out, first with eBay and then Amazon. We have heard about small stores in villages having to compete in the face of non-collection of huge amounts of tax from the likes of Amazon, which avoid their fair share of tax or run rings around HMRC. That affects small businesses because they pick up the tab.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I have been listening with growing disbelief to the hon. Gentleman’s running commentary of doom on our
approach to business. He mentioned tax avoidance, but does he recognise that since 2010 we have, through our measures against avoidance, evasion and non-compliance, brought in £160 billion? We have reduced the tax gap—the amount of tax that should have been collected but has not—to 6.5% of tax. That exceeds any year when his party were in government.

Peter Dowd: I am pleased that the Minister has brought that to my attention. I bring to his attention Labour’s tax enforcement programme, as well as our manifesto, “Funding Britain’s Future”, and our industrial strategy. I am sure that the Minister has read those avidly and will no doubt revisit them.

SMEs find it increasingly difficult to operate around the tricky and ever-changing tax law while HMRC has been directed to crack down hard on them. The likes of Martin McTague, policy director at the Federation of Small Businesses, recently accused HMRC of going for the soft underbelly by tackling SMEs over tax avoidance and evasion rather than showing the same energy in confronting larger companies, and arguably, by underfunding and not resourcing appropriately.

Robert Jenrick: Will the hon. Gentleman answer the point that I made in my remarks about why the Labour manifesto included an increase in corporation tax for small businesses? If it cares about small businesses rather than large ones, why increase business profits tax for them?

Peter Dowd: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman reads the totality of the document, about the whole environment in which small businesses would operate. It is not a question of one element, but the total environment. That is the point I am trying to get across. It is not one specific thing, such as tax for small or large businesses, but the complete environment in which businesses must operate that we must consider. The current environment is not the most conducive to business for SMEs, in my humble opinion. That is my view; Members may agree with it or not.

We are committed to putting small and medium-sized businesses at the heart of our economic policy. We value them.

Mel Stride: To pursue the point a little further, I understand that the Labour party’s policies are to put up the corporation tax rate to 26%, whereas we are going down to 17%. The difference is a huge gulf—a huge additional tax burden on British businesses. Has the hon. Gentleman’s party conducted any analysis of the impact that that huge hike in taxation is likely to have on jobs, wealth creation, taxes and our ability to fund our public services?

Peter Dowd: Of course we have.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): What’s the answer?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman, from a sedentary position, asks for the answer. We are here for the Government to defend their record, not for a defence of what Labour’s record will be. [Interruption.] It is okay for Members to laugh, but the bottom line is that the economy is in chaos. Only yesterday the OECD effectively said that the Government should rethink their position on corporation tax. That is not coming from me; it comes from our partners elsewhere.

We want to support small and medium-sized enterprises. I have made the point that it is ridiculous to suggest that they are somehow a foreign land to the Labour party. The country needs, and we have set out, proper investment in the economy and skills and increased productivity. We believe that small businesses can play a part in investment, in a rise in productivity and in helping with skills shortages; but in turn it is our responsibility to help them. I am not sure that they are getting the support they need.

3.27 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing this excellent debate. I recognise the extraordinary passion with which he has always prosecuted the argument for the importance of small business, not least in St Ives. As a fellow west country Member of Parliament, I am grateful for all that he has done to fly that flag over the years.

I have sat with growing incredulity as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for whom I have a lot of personal respect, has set out Labour’s stall as the party for business. Apparently it is not the Conservatives, a number of whose Members are here for this important debate, who are the party for business, but the Labour party, represented just by the shadow Minister, who of course needs to be here, unlike his absent colleagues who chose not to be. I think that says a great deal. The hon. Gentleman referred to the chaos presided over by the Government. I am afraid I simply do not recognise that suggestion. The economy has been growing for the past four years. We have more people in employment than at any time in our history, we have the lowest level of unemployment since 1975 and we have slashed the deficit by three quarters. That is not the hallmark of a Government who are in economic chaos.

To move on to the question in hand—the importance of small businesses, and particularly taxation of small businesses—I want first to recognise the huge contribution that they make to the economy. I thought my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) quite movingly described his early years when, sitting at the family table, he realised that every pound mattered. I think the expression he used was that the roof of the house was at risk, in some sense. I recognise, having had a similar background and watched my parents and family go through a similar experience, and having created a business myself and done the same, that we owe a huge debt to the 5 million small business people who do what they do day in, day out, and who often worry about it greatly.

Small businesses are delivering. Small businesses are generating 48% of private sector employment. About a third of private sector turnover comes by way of small businesses. The benefits are not just there for those involved in small businesses; they are there for us all and for society. Small businesses pay the taxes that in turn pay for public services, for the doctors, nurses and paramedics and for the army, police, fire services and so on—all the things that are the hallmark of a civilised society. We owe them a very large debt.
When we talk about job creation, wealth creation and taxation, it is important to recognise that it is not government that does those things, but it is government that sets the environment. The Government can pull the levers that make it easier, or sometimes get in the way and make it more difficult to achieve particular outcomes. I would like to focus on some of the things we are doing.

First, outside the tax sphere, we have the British Business Bank, which has facilitated £9.2 billion in finance. Lending through the bank was up 24% on the previous year. We are channelling money into commerce. We have the StartUp loans programme, from which 50,000 entrepreneurs have benefited, and those are individuals who typically cannot go to family for the funding required. It is small amounts of money, but they have the get-up-and-go and the desire to make something happen in the business environment. We have the enterprise finance guarantee scheme, which has driven £2.9 billion of investment in business to date. Most of those guaranteed loans—I think they average a little over £100,000 each—are going into the small business community.

We have done a huge amount on the tax front. Many Members have raised some of the issues in the debate this afternoon. Corporation tax was 28% when we came into office in 2010. It is now down at 19%, and we made a manifesto commitment for it to head down to 17% by 2020-21. That is a huge drop in taxation. For those who are self-employed and unincorporated, the personal allowance has risen dramatically since 2010 to £11,500. It is heading further up to £12,500, taking 3 million to 4 million people out of tax altogether. Once again, that is us assisting those in business not operating through a corporate or company structure.

The employment allowance was mentioned. It is an allowance of £3,000 for anyone employing someone. If someone has four workers on the national living wage, which my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) rightly lauded, they would be paying just £30 in national insurance. That is huge assistance for the smallest companies and for generating jobs.

Entrepreneurs’ relief has been much spoken about. It increases the lifetime allowance to £10 million so that the capital gains tax for entrepreneurs when they sell shares in their businesses is just 10%, rather than 20% or potentially 28%. The new state pension has not been mentioned. It started in 2016 and benefits the self-employed to the tune of £1,900 a year.

We are making a number of important changes that support business, but I want to turn specifically to a few of the contributions to this afternoon’s debate. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives raised the Government recognising that accounting for VAT can be a burden on small businesses. That is why we maintain the highest VAT registration threshold in Europe, which increased to £85,000 in April 2017. That keeps more than 3 million of the smallest businesses out of VAT and costs the Exchequer around £2 billion a year. The case for change has been regularly reviewed over the years, and views on the threshold are divided. While some businesses have argued that a higher threshold would reduce administrative burdens, others contend that a lower threshold would provide a fairer competitive environment, and that the current threshold incentivises some businesses just below the threshold to limit their recorded turnover and creates unfair competition between businesses operating above and below the threshold. The Government have therefore asked the Office of Tax Simplification to consider the registration threshold as part of its current review of VAT. The final report is due to be published in early November and we look forward to hearing its recommendations.

I recognise my hon. Friend’s concerns about the fairness of business rates, but the Government do not believe there is a case to scrap the system entirely. The objective of business rates is to raise revenue to pay for key local services. The Government concluded a fundamental review of business rates at Budget 2016 and the consensus was to maintain them as a property tax. Respondents agreed that property-based taxes were easy to collect, difficult to avoid and had a clear link with local authority spending.

Some evidence was provided that suggested that changes were taking place in the use of property. A number of hon. Members highlighted the shift away from bricks-and-mortar retailing towards greater online retailing.
However, the overall picture was of changing patterns of use within different sectors, rather than a decline in property use overall. Although increased internet shopping might lead some larger retailers to rationalise their portfolio of physical property, some Members pointed out that this has led to increased demand for retail warehouses, and that new, more leisure-orientated businesses are now occupying traditional retail space on many high streets.

None the less, the Government recognise that business rates represent a high fixed cost for small businesses. That is why, in the 2016 Budget, the then Chancellor introduced an £8.9 billion package of measures providing support for all rate payers. That package included making the 100% small business rate relief permanent and raising the thresholds from April 2017. As a result, 600,000 of the smallest businesses will not pay business rates again. It also included raising the rateable value threshold for the standard multiplier to £51,000 from April 2017, taking a quarter of a million properties, including some high-street shops, out of the higher rate of business rates. All rate payers will also benefit from the switch in indexation from the retail prices index to the main measure of inflation. That represents a cut every year worth £1.1 billion by 2022.

Some small businesses are also eligible for rural rate relief, as has been mentioned. We are looking to revalue properties more frequently, and plan to look more broadly at the way in which we address the perceived unfairness of companies that operate in bricks and mortar being effectively treated differently from those that do not.

Finally, I turn briefly to Making Tax Digital, which represents a major step towards the Government’s objective of helping businesses to get their tax right first time. It is, however, a big change, and although it has received broad support, some stakeholders have voiced concern about the scale and pace of change. The Government have listened carefully to those concerns. In July, I announced significant changes to the scope and timetable for Making Tax Digital.

Businesses will not now be mandated to join Making Tax Digital until April 2019, and then only to meet their VAT obligations. Businesses with turnover below the VAT threshold will be able to choose whether to take part. The scope of MTD will not be widened before the changes are shown to work, and not before 2020 at the earliest. No business will have to file VAT returns more frequently than it does currently. Approximately 3 million small businesses that would have been mandated will have the flexibility of joining MTD at their own pace. I am confident that many businesses will recognise the benefits of a streamlined digital experience and will choose to do so.

Once again, I thank everyone for taking part in this important debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives. It has given us the opportunity to demonstrate the Government’s commitment to backing business wholeheartedly, as we will do going forward.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Mr Thomas, is there anything you want to say to wind up?

3.41 pm

Derek Thomas: Unquestionably, since 2010 the Government have taken action to support small businesses and stimulate local economic growth. I am glad that the debate has provided an opportunity to remind the House of those measures. I am also glad that we have been able to discuss the introduction of positive employee support, such as the national living wage and auto-enrolment.

We are united in our desire to ensure that Great Britain remains open for business. Our desire is to make Great Britain a great place to run businesses, which is why my plea, on behalf of rural areas that are largely populated by small businesses, is to reform how we tax them. I thank everyone who took part in the debate. I apologise to the shadow Minister for what seemed to be quite an uncomfortable experience for him.

As we have heard, the business rate charge is hurting many independent small businesses. It is time to install some fairness into business taxation. I maintain that a tax system that reflects the activity of the business, rather than the building from which it operates, has to be fairer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect of taxes on small businesses.

3.42 pm

Sitting suspended.
Capital Funding: New Hospital in Harlow

[Mr George Howarth in the Chair]

4 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered capital funding for a new hospital in Harlow.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and I am grateful to Mr Speaker for allowing this debate. The Princess Alexandra Hospital was completed in 1966 to provide acute hospital and specialist services for around 350,000 people living in Harlow and the surrounding areas. Alongside others, I have been working hard for Harlow residents to improve healthcare services, so that they are fit for the 21st century. I have worked to secure extra funding and more doctors and nurses for our hospital, and the new leadership team work tirelessly to do everything possible to improve performance.

However, only so much can be done at the hospital as it stands. The infrastructure is deteriorating. The accident and emergency services are overstretched and staff retention remains a serious problem. It is for these reasons that I am putting forward the case for capital funding for a new health campus in Harlow, bringing together accident and emergency services, GP provision, social care, physiotherapy and a new ambulance hub—bringing healthcare in Harlow into the 21st century.

The Princess Alexandra Hospital is in special measures. It was judged as inadequate overall by the Care Quality Commission in 2016. It is important to note, however, that maternity and gynaecology were rated outstanding at the inspection. Day in, day out, a huge amount of remarkable work is done by the hospital leadership, the hospital’s chief executive Lance McCarthy, and above all the doctors, nurses and auxiliary staff, to provide the very best care they can.

I take this opportunity to thank and praise the health trade unions, led by people such as Councillor Tony Durcan from the nurses’ union, and Councillor Waida Forman and Daniella Pritchard from Unison, whose only aim, whatever our occasional political differences, is to improve the quality of hospital care and the services for their members. Much of this improvement work has been noted by the CQC. Its report, however, outlined various remaining concerns, from staff shortages to deteriorating mortuary fridges, some of which were no longer fit for purpose and were ordered to be repaired during the inspection.

This leads me to my first and most pressing concern. The Princess Alexandra Hospital is not fit for purpose. It is unable to provide healthcare fit for the 21st century and Harlow and the wider area. According to the CQC report in 2016:

“The environment was one of the top risks for the trust. The estate was aged and in need of repairs costing tens of millions”.

Much of the hospital is original and therefore over 50 years old. It has exceeded its useful life and much of the infrastructure is in a state of permanent decline. In addition to the original hospital built in the 1960s, a number of temporary structures have been added, many of which have now surpassed their 10 to 15-year lifespan. That creates a complicated design, with urgent care spread across the site.

A 2013 survey rated 56% of the hospital’s estate as unacceptable or below for its quality and physical condition, which puts the capacity of the hospital to care for those in need at serious risk. That becomes strikingly clear when we read and hear reports of sewage and rainwater flowing into the operating theatres.

The doctors, nurses, management team and support staff at the Princess Alexandra Hospital work so hard, every single day, but their working lives are made so much harder by the hospital’s deteriorating facilities. In addition to the ageing infrastructure, the services are under increasing pressure to provide care to residents in Harlow and the surrounding area. Changes to other local facilities have placed additional pressures on the trust’s capacity, resulting in occupancy levels running higher than 96%. That means that the Princess Alexandra is not only fundamental to the health and wellbeing of the growing Harlow population, but to a wider area, including parts of Hertfordshire and Epping Forest—it is very good to have my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) in the Chamber to ensure we get good health services in our area.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour on securing this important debate. Does he agree with me that in my constituency and his, ever since the previous Labour Government scrapped their plans for a new hospital at Hatfield, there has been a sense locally that somehow our area has been ignored for capital investment, and that is why his proposal is so sensible?

Robert Halfon: As usual, my hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I will come on to how changes in nearby hospitals have had a significant effect on the Princess Alexandra Hospital.

The emergency department in particular suffers. As the CQC reported last year:

“Long waits in the emergency department and capacity issues in the wards meant that patients were not always seen in a timely manner, with many patients in the emergency department breaching four hour and 12-hour targets.”

As I understand it, we have the highest A&E use of any hospital in England. The department struggles to deliver the national four-hour standard, achieving 72% for 2016-17. Having said that, the A&E department saw 10,628 more people in less than four hours last year than it did in 2009-10. This improvement is astonishing when considered against the changes to the nearby emergency departments and with attendance rates at the Princess Alexandra Hospital being 10% higher than the national average, at around 200 to 300 visitors per day.

Chase Farm Hospital near Enfield became an urgent care centre in 2013. The same happened at the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital near Welwyn Garden City in 2014. Urgent care centres only deal with minor injuries, while the Princess Alexandra Hospital deals with those plus major injuries, including life-threatening chest pains and head injuries. All major injuries and illnesses have been dispersed to surrounding emergency departments, and attendance at the Princess Alexandra Hospital has risen consistently.
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent and passionate speech about the needs of his community—a new town, just like mine. He is setting out the problems of decaying infrastructure against a backdrop of increasing population. Does he agree that, as new town MPs, we should be championing our hospitals at all times? They are the centre of our communities and cement our identity. Hospitals are something people are deeply attached to and they form so much of what the town is, whether it is the Princess Alexandra or the Princess Royal in Telford.

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend has set up the all-party parliamentary group on new towns, of which she is the chair and I am pleased to be vice-chairman. We set it up because we have many of the same problems. Our towns were built at the same time and we have the same issues, whether it is to do with our hospitals or regenerating housing and our high streets. I thank her for the work she does on this and the way she represents her new town and her constituents in Telford.

As I was about to say, the hospital secured £1.95 million of emergency department capital funding in April this year, allowing significant building works to support the department’s work, including the expansion of the medical assessments base. That is coupled with an A&E-focused recruitment drive to take advantage of the new facilities.

That leads me on to staff recruitment and retention. While Harlow hospital now has 27 more doctors and 35 more nurses than in 2010, the vacancy rate in recruitment is a perpetual worry. The nurse vacancy rate for September stood at 25%. Staff vacancy rates were picked up in the CQC report in 2016, in which inspectors found that “staff shortages meant that wards were struggling to cope with the numbers of patients and that staff were moved from one ward to cover staff shortages on others.”

The proximity of Princess Alexandra Hospital to London plays a major role and, although pay weighting is a factor, I have been told by the hospital leadership and Harlow Council’s chief executive, Malcolm Morley, who is in Parliament today, that career development is significant. Princess Alexandra Hospital must compete with Barrow University Hospital in specialist training and career development. The retention support programme established career clinics and clear career pathways, but there is only so much that the hospital can do to compete with the huge investment and facilities at London hospitals. Harlow needs to be able recruit and retain staff. Recruitment is related partly to the future of the hospital itself and partly to the staff’s ability to develop their careers in Harlow. Of course, both factors relate to the hospital’s infrastructure.

I have tried to make sure that our NHS in Harlow is a top priority for the Government, and I have had many meetings with the Health Secretary and the hospitals Minister. I am pleased to say that they have visited our hospital a number of times, most recently in May, when the Health Secretary visited the Princess Alexandra Hospital to speak to the hospital leadership team about Harlow’s case for a new hospital. He spoke of “the exciting proposals which are coming together to invest capital in upgrading these facilities, including the option of a brand new hospital.”

He also stated: “These proposals are at an early stage but upgrading services on this important site will be a priority for a Conservative government.”

Following capital funding announcements for sustainability and transformation partnerships in July, I was informed that “Princess Alexandra Hospital is still a real priority” for the Department of Health “and work is ongoing to take it forward”, and that the Government are “on hand” to carry on helping to get the Princess Alexandra bid together. Given that the Health Secretary said that Princess Alexandra Hospital is a priority case, will the Minister say what the current budget is for capital funding and how it will be allocated to new hospitals, such as Harlow?

In autumn 2016, the Secretary of State requested that the PAH board, the local clinical commissioning group and local authority partners progress a strategic outline case. After considering a number of options, “the SOC concluded that a new hospital on a green field site, potentially as part of a broader health campus, to be the most affordable solution for the local system”—note the expression “most affordable”—“and the solution that would deliver most benefit to our population.”

The health campus would bring together all the services required to ensure that healthcare in Harlow is fit for the 21st century: emergency and GP services, physio, social care, a new ambulance hub, a centre for nursing and healthcare training.

Having recently met the chief executive of the East of England Ambulance Service, I know that there has been a significant increase in the number of calls from critical patients who need a fast response. Harlow has four new ambulances but the development of a top-class ambulance hub would allow huge improvements in that area. The health campus could also act as a centre for degree apprenticeships in nursing and healthcare, bringing specialist training to the eastern region. It could build on strong links between the Princess Alexandra Hospital and Harlow College and capitalise on the new Anglia Ruskin MedTech innovation centre at the Harlow enterprise zone.

The health campus proposal has been supported by West Essex CCG, the East and North Hertfordshire CCG and the Hertfordshire and West Essex STP, which brings together 13 local bodies and hospital trusts. A joint letter has been signed by more than 10 councils, including Harlow Council, Epping Forest District Council, Essex County Council and the Greater London Authority.

Despite recognition from local authorities and Ministers alike, some NHS England officials—I stress the word “some”—suggest that a refurbishment would be more fitting than the development of a brand-new hospital, due to capital funding constraints. That solution is the equivalent of an Elastoplast—a short-term option that will do nothing to solve real, long-term problems.

Given the support from the Government and key organisations, we need to be sure that plans for a new hospital are not obstructed. Will the Minister give an assurance that NHS England and NHS Improvement will work positively with public, private and voluntary sector partners to progress the plans? A rapid strategic solution is needed, rather than a short-term fix.

The cost of the new campus model would be between £280 million and £490 million, depending on the type and preferred method of funding. The hospital leadership is looking at all the options to maximise public sector
My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that the current buildings and facilities are ageing and inadequate. Although there are clearly practical operational challenges around the recent CQC report, it underlines a point that his speech brought out really well: given their state, the buildings and facilities are frankly no longer fit for purpose. We have all recognised that for some years, and I hope that the Department will recognise it too, in respect of both immediate and longer-term capital.

My right hon. Friend rightly pointed out that some have said, “Well, let’s tart it up—let’s refurbish the existing buildings.” I speak partly as a chartered surveyor. I have been around those buildings on many occasions and spoken to patients and staff. It is clear to me that, on that very constrained site, refurbishment is not practical. Indeed, it could prove very poor value for money for the Minister.

Let me come to my third and final point, which is to look ahead. My right hon. Friend rightly pointed out that this is an opportunity, but I say to the Minister that we have a rapidly growing population. Indeed, the elderly population is growing even more rapidly. In my constituency, the growth in the population of those aged 65 and over is three times greater than that of the rest. I therefore ask him to think about the present and to support the changes as strongly as he can.

4.20 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. You have chaired the debate admirably in allowing my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) to get in to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) in his excellent speech, which was both concise and heartfelt.

I visited the hospital with my right hon. Friend a year ago, shortly after the trust went into special measures. I share his view about the commitment of the staff, which was evident to us on that occasion, at a time when, it would be fair to say, there was a state of some unease, the trust having just gone into a special measures regime. In part, we were there to reassure them that it could be a learning process from which they could improve the services offered to their patients, notwithstanding the challenges presented by the consequences of the CQC report.

My right hon. Friend is a consistent and persistent champion for his area and for this project, which has been in germination for some time. It is timely that he should bring it to the House’s attention; I will go on to explain why. I may not be able to satisfy him completely on the questions he has put to me, but I will do my best.

The Princess Alexandra Hospital faces many issues with its estate, as is evident to anyone who visits the site. That is why I know that PAH staff are second to none. However, their professionalism and hard work will go to waste unless our hospital is fit for purpose. I know that the Secretary of State recognises that, given his numerous visits to the hospital and what he has said since. I know that the Minister himself recognises that, given his visit to the hospital this time last year. I know that all the key local authorities, neighbouring MPs and trusts are supportive. I urge the Minister to do everything possible to ensure that Harlow has a hospital that is fit for the 21st century.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call Mark Prisk, he needs to be aware that adequate time must be allowed for the Minister to respond. If he does not appear to be finishing his speech in a timely manner, as I am sure he will, I will intervene to bring in the Minister.

4.17 pm

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Thank you for your guidance, Mr Howarth. I will do my best—the best a politician ever can do—to be brief.

First, may I say a huge congratulations to my parliamentary neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon)? He and I have worked together on a number of projects. I want to make the point to the Minister that this issue is of real concern to many of us, not just in Harlow, important though that is, but in east Hertfordshire. I mentioned the problems in years past in Welwyn Hatfield. There is genuine concern that our area as a whole has been denuded of capital investment. Given its growing population, which I will come to, that cannot continue.

Importantly, there is a partnership in Harlow and its neighbouring areas among the health services, local government and communities.
Any service change that might come to the Princess Alexandra Hospital is primarily a matter for the local health authorities. They recognise that and therefore have come up with various proposals. As my right hon. Friend would expect, any proposed changes that are pursued will be subject to the usual procedures and public consultation.

My right hon. Friend pointed out that the local NHS trust looked at five options for a potential redevelopment of the Princess Alexandra Hospital. The strategic case for change concluded that a new hospital on a greenfield site would be not only the most affordable solution but the one that would deliver the most benefit for the local population. West Essex CCG, as lead commissioner for services provided by the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust, supports that proposal.

Harlow is due to undergo significant economic and residential housing growth in the next 10 years. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend referred to the contribution that Public Health England will be making to that: it remains our ambition to create a world-class health life sciences facility in his constituency. I understand that as part of the potential development of some 10,000 homes in the Gilston area to the north of Harlow, there is the possibility of a new junction for the M11. That gives rise to potential greenfield sites and the opportunity for significant planning gain. That will be available to the local authority as it considers assisting any service change that might come to the Princess Alexandra Hospital. Our hospital,” and is currently preparing for its next public consultation.

Before I return to the central issue of capital raised by my right hon. Friend, I will touch on the special measures regime, which the hospital has been in since October last year, following a CQC report that rated the trust as “inadequate” overall. He identified the new management and since we visited, the trust has got a new improvement director in post. I think the new chair was in post when we visited, and he has recently recruited a new chief executive with whom he worked in a previous trust to drive through turnaround improvement. They are individuals in whom the Department has considerable confidence. It is good to hear that much of that improvement work is starting to come through.

A multidisciplinary transformation team called “quality first” has been established, which aims to drive through quality improvement and service reconfiguration across the hospital. Peer reviews are taking place on a two-weekly basis, which are being fed down to departments and wards within the hospital to drive improvement from the bedside. The most recent external peer review was conducted in June and helped to highlight areas of focus to assist the trust in its journey out of special measures status.

A consequence of that work is that there is now compliance at the trust with referral-to-treatment waiting times, which is not universal across the NHS at the moment—would that it were. It is also meeting cancer standards and ensuring that cancelled operations are rebooked within 28 days. That is positive concrete evidence of progress coming through the regime. There have also been improvements in critical care and end-of-life care since the CQC inspection. The trust has developed and launched a framework for a five-year plan, “Your future, our hospital,” and is currently preparing for its next CQC inspection, which will take place next month. We will all look at the outcome of that with great interest.

To return to the core question of capital, my right hon. Friend is right to identify the emergence of Department funding from which Harlow benefited: waves 1 and 2 of the current £100-million A&E pot. There is a bid in train for the final tranche of that funding. We will see whether or not that succeeds, but, certainly off the top of my head, I think Harlow has achieved more than any other trust in securing capital to help improve the situation in its emergency department.

More significantly, the trust has submitted additional capital bids to cover funding for other ancillary aspects of improving care in the hospital: a second maternity theatre, urgent estates infrastructure work and strategic estates transformation. All capital funding bids have to follow the same course as those of any other trust in the country. As a result, I am not in a position to confirm the trust’s prospects for success in this competitive round. The timeliness of the debate is that all STP areas have submitted bids for the next round of capital funding. I confirm that a proposal has gone in for Princess Alexandra. We await the Budget this autumn to see whether the Chancellor will allocate phase 2 capital for STP transformation. He indicated in March that he was intent to do so, so we are hopeful that that will occur.

The extent to which there is capital available to support very significant projects will depend on how much is made available by the Treasury.

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Women Released from Prison

4.29 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered women released from prison.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, as I am sure I have said many times. In the UK today, almost 4,000 women are in prison. Although many are serving long, extended sentences worthy of the horrendous crimes they have committed, more than 80% of convictions for women are for non-violent crimes, half of sentences being less than six months. The crimes most commonly committed by women are theft and handling of stolen goods. For many, those are a last resort—a desperate measure to feed a family or fund an addiction. When we consider the consequences of prison for such women, we should ask whether incarceration is the correct response.

After their sentences are served, women leaving prison face inordinate difficulties in readjusting to life. Homelessness is at the core of the problem; on release, six in 10 women do not have a home to go to. Without an address—permanent or temporary—safe and secure employment is near impossible. As a result, fewer than one in 10 women released from a prison sentence of less than 12 months manage to secure a positive employment outcome within a year. For those who struggle to find work, and often for those who find it, social security can be difficult to come by. Without a home, income or a family, the path to reconviction is clear; 45% of women are reconvicted within one year of leaving prison. Many women reoffend to fund a life outside prison, although many will do so aware that life can be easier inside prison.

Such problems for women should force the House to reconsider the use of custodial sentences for low-level crimes. Women—especially those with a history of social and financial difficulties—will often leave prison in a far worse situation than when they entered. Separated from their families, relationships may have broken down, and the resulting pressures can further an issue that was present before the sentence began. These women need help with the initial problem, and support from the state and society to identify and tackle it.

A prison sentence will not in itself reform a woman who only stole in the initial instance to feed her children, nor will it reform a woman with an addiction, be it to alcohol, drugs or gambling. Addiction is an illness, and the crimes committed to fund addictions are a symptom of that illness. Someone suffering from a physical medical condition will be offered treatment to ease their symptoms, but someone suffering from addiction is given a punishment.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this welcome and important debate. Does he also agree that working with people suffering serious addiction issues is unlikely to be effective in the typically short sentences that women experience? A long period of time is needed to work with someone who has deep-seated problems.

Chris Elmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is part of the wider issue of whether a six-month custodial sentence is acceptable. I am not advocating that we should extend custodial sentences; it is about rehabilitation being part of that work, rather than a custodial sentence. In fact, she brings me on to my next point: very well; a short prison sentence will not fix the problem. It is far more likely to be a catalyst for a downward spiral that will see these women yo-yo between addiction, committing crimes and short prison sentences for the rest of their life.

Ministers say these issues are not exclusive to women. However, decisions made in recent years have created a system that creates difficulties specific to women. The lack of women-only prisons primarily creates issues as it results in women facing sentences far from home. There are only 12 women’s prisons across England and Scotland, and none at all in either Wales or Northern Ireland; for Welsh women, the closest facility is in Gloucestershire. Staggeringly, some women in Scotland are placed in female units within male prisons—a trend that looks likely to be adopted across the whole of the UK in future—while women in Northern Ireland are detained in a male youth offenders centre.

At present, more than 17,000 children are separated from their mothers due to imprisonment, fewer than 10% of whom are being cared for by their fathers. Distance makes visiting difficult at best and impossible at worst, which has a harmful effect on the children’s welfare. Upon release, women may face further difficulties when a lack of local provision means they are again located 100 miles or more from their families. For some women and men, living in an approved property is a condition of their release on licence. These approved properties are single-sex establishments, and while there are 94 locations across England and Wales for men, including several in London, there are only six for women. They are in Bedford, Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Preston and Reading; none of them are in London and, once again, none are in Wales.

Again women are forced to be away from everything familiar to them. They may be out of the physical prison building, but they are still prisoners of circumstance, separated from their families and communities and expected to reintegrate into a society that is unfamiliar to them. The Government should provide suitable facilities and sufficient support care for those vulnerable women on their release from prison. In my opinion, the Government are at present failing to do so.

In May 2017, a woman from London brought a case against the Secretary of State for Justice after she was forced to relocate to Bedford on her release from prison. She appealed on the grounds that the distribution of approved properties was unlawful sex discrimination against women. In a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court upheld her appeal and found that the Government were indeed discriminating against women on their release from prison. That was five months ago. Disappointingly, there was no response from the Government and no action was taken. It is my understanding that that is still the case today; perhaps the Minister will look at that specific point.

Women leaving prison will always face some difficulty in readjusting, but the complexities they face under this Government are not necessary. It is neither right nor inevitable that women, on their release from prison, should be left homeless and destitute. It is not right that they should be deprived of safe and secure employment, access to social security and support, and it is not right that, by virtue of the Government’s neglect of facilities,
they are forced into communities hundreds of miles from their families. I hope that the Government will consider the difficulties faced by women leaving prison, and that they will act to ensure an easier transition from custody to society, free from homelessness, poverty and reconviction.

4.36 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to contribute to the debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I am pleased that we are having the debate, as I have a long-standing interest in the experience of women in the penal system. I thank the many organisations that have supported me both for this debate and over a number of years, including Agenda, the Prison Reform Trust and the Howard League for Penal Reform, as well as Women in Prison, and which give us excellent briefings and information.

The title of this debate is about women leaving prison but, like my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), I will first talk about women going into prison. Alarmingly, the number of women in prison exceeded 4,000 for the first time in July 2017. As we know, the experience of women in prison is generally not a good one: 16 women died in custody in 2015-16 and there have been 18 suicides in 2016 and 2017 so far. That is 14 more than in the previous eight years put together. As we heard from my hon. Friend, many women who have a period in custody face losing their home and their children as a result of incarceration. We know that many also suffer mental health difficulties, which time in prison may exacerbate.

An increase in the number of women going into prison troubles me—especially to the extent that it reflects a perverse consequence of the Transforming Rehabilitation programme. I think it is a commonly understood problem that that programme is leading to a rise in the number of women being recalled to prison.

The number of women recalled to custody following their release has increased by 68% since the end of 2014, according to analysis by the Prison Reform Trust. The number of those with a sentence of less than 12 months returned to custody after licence recall was 14.6 times higher in the first quarter of this year than in the first quarter of 2015. The numbers in the first quarter of 2017 were 220 women, compared with just 15 women two years before.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore said, despite the intentions of Transforming Rehabilitation to reduce reoffending, women are increasingly going round and round in a revolving door. We need to do better, both to keep women out of custody and to prevent them from returning to custody following release from a period in prison.

There may be a number of reasons for the high rate of recall, but one that alarms me is that the through-the-gate support that was envisaged to be provided by dedicated case managers in Transforming Rehabilitation is not yet properly in place. Nor are all community rehabilitation companies offering genuinely gender-specific programmes. My first question to the Minister is: will he review how Transforming Rehabilitation is working and the role of community rehabilitation companies in preparing women for and supporting them on release?

I am concerned that the Transforming Rehabilitation model means that the provision that should be in place for women completing custodial sentences is fragmented. The majority of women, most of whom commit less serious crimes, are likely to fall under the auspices of the community rehabilitation companies, with only a small number of women deemed high risk being supervised by the national probation service.

I understand the risk model that underpins Transforming Rehabilitation. I do not entirely agree with the model and am not convinced that it is viable, but I understand what the Government say it should look like. However, the number of women prisoners referred to the national probation service will be so infinitesimally small in the scheme of things that it is difficult to see how gender-sensitive models can be devised by the NPS for this very small group of very vulnerable women.

One suggestion I would like to put to the Minister is that all women leaving custody should be supervised by the CRCs, not the national probation service. Will he investigate that suggestion and make an assessment of the risk implications of doing so? Those risks could be mitigated, or indeed more than balanced out, by improving access to dedicated gender-sensitive support focused in the CRCs and available to all women.

I am sure the Minister will be well aware of the whole-system approach we have been trialling in Greater Manchester, where my constituency is. I very much commend that approach to him. The programme aims to embed integrated gender-responsive support services for women at three points in the criminal justice system—on arrest, sentencing and release from prison. Nine women’s centres in Greater Manchester provide support hubs for women referred via a range of routes. The services they offer are very much appreciated by the women who access them. I visited my own women’s centre and can absolutely vouch for how the women feel about them and the positive experience they have. They welcome the opportunity to be in a women-only safe space.

The 2015 evaluation of the whole-system approach carried out by Sheffield Hallam and Manchester Metropolitan universities found that service users had revealed a strong sense of despair, hopelessness and isolation prior to engaging with the support on offer at the women’s centre. Once they had that engagement, it gave them a sense of purpose and a structure to their day. It gave them aspirations for the future in terms of volunteering and employment opportunities and led to improvements in health and opportunities to re-engage with their children and families. The development of that positive sense of self is really necessary in improving wellbeing and reducing the isolation and lack of confidence that often lead women to offend and take them to a crisis point where criminal behaviour may result.

Particularly notable in the research and the service users’ own accounts was the fact that such intensive and tailored support was not available to them before their engagement with the women’s centres. Providing a more efficient service with less duplication and burden on statutory agencies was also reported to be a perceived benefit of the approach. Women’s centres were said to be places women could turn to and could be linked to other organisations in the community that could help them, which is important, given that the statutory agencies
with which women are involved may not be aware of or not have time to make links with one another and offer all sources of support.

I of course acknowledge that the internal alliance between different statutory and voluntary agencies has improved the sharing of good practice and facilitated some of the pathways, but there are concerns. Some have expressed concerns that innovation will be squeezed out as the pathways become more standardised. Not all referral routes appear to be working fully effectively to refer women into the women's centre provision. As I say, through-the-gate referrals have been particularly disappointing, perhaps because of the lack of dedicated through-the-gate case managers.

Women themselves may not know of or understand the support they could obtain from the women's centres and be doubtful about it. When I visited Styal Prison recently, women peer mentors in the prison suggested that they should be able to liaise between the prison and women's centres to encourage women coming up to completion of their custodial sentences to move on to use the women's centre facilities.

However, the most crucial problem—it will come as no surprise to anybody in the room—is uncertainty about funding. Indeed, that applies to not only the whole-system approach in Greater Manchester, but women's centres up and down the country.

May I make a suggestion to the Minister? I am not optimistic, but I keep suggesting this in the hope that one day a Minister will agree with me. I suggest, on the 10th anniversary of the seminal Corston report, which suggested that women should serve their sentences in community settings, that rather than money being put into new community prisons, which as far as I can tell are prisons in all but name, that money could be better directed at supporting women's centres and rehabilitation programmes in the community. More women could be reached. They could be supported to remain at home, to care for their children and to work if they were able to do so. As we know, those are all important factors in reducing reoffending and costs to the public purse. Instead, precarious funding of community provision is exacerbated by cuts to other services, such as mental health services, and to the benefits on which women leaving prison will rely.

Housing is a particular issue. The Prison Reform Trust says that, as we have heard, 60% of women prisoners do not have homes to go to on release. I draw the Minister's attention particularly to the following problem, which I heard about in Styal. A woman who had served a custodial sentence, who had a history of offending behaviour and addiction and had been treated as having made herself intentionally homeless by her housing authority before going into custody, was not able to point to the successful programme of rehabilitation that she had undertaken in prison in order to have her housing application treated differently on release. Would the Minister, with Department for Communities and Local Government colleagues, look into that?

I am conscious that you want me to move on, Mr Howarth, so I will make just two final points. The first is on universal credit, which we are debating in the main Chamber this afternoon. The prisons tell me that they cannot start a woman's application for universal credit in advance of her release. That means that women often leave prison with just £47 to their name and a six-week wait. I hope the Minister will talk to his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions about whether it might be possible to start the application process for universal credit in the prison ahead of the release date.

Finally, I emphasise the importance of family contact, particularly contact with children, which we all know is also a very important factor in helping to reduce offending and reoffending. My final example on that is that on my recent visit to Styal, I met an EU national whose daughter was suffering very severe health problems, having just given birth. The grandmother was deemed low risk by the prison, no longer had her passport and, with a new grandchild, was very unlikely to abscond, yet she could not be granted a family resettlement visit, which would have enabled her to go to her daughter and provide the family with some support.

I hope the Minister will pick up some of the quite detailed but practical points that I have raised, because we all share the common goal of reducing the number of women in custody and helping them to be rehabilitated in the community.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order.

Kate Green: I apologise, Mr Howarth.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Three further people wish to speak. If they all take longer than the Minister gets to wind up the debate, I will not be able to get them in.

4.47 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing this important debate.

With nearly 50% of the women serving time in prison having experienced some form of abuse, be it physical, emotional or sexual, surely we should be putting more resources into supporting and counselling them than punishing them with prison sentences. Ten years ago, Baroness Corston published her “Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System”. In it, she talked about the very things that we are talking about here today: the chaos and disruption experienced by families; the disproportionate and inappropriate sentences that women face for minor non-violent offences; and the victims of violence, sexual abuse and childhood neglect who end up in prison because of lack of support.

At the time of writing her report, Baroness Corston called for a fundamental rethink. She addressed the need to consider the issues connected with women offenders before considering imprisonment as a serious option. When we read through the recommendations, we realise that the review could easily have been written 10 weeks rather than 10 years ago, because very little has changed. Women are still being imprisoned without consideration of whether that is the best solution and are still coming out of prison without the necessary support and facilitation to help them to reintegrate into the community.

In recent months, I have visited prisons and met too many women who have been appallingly let down by the welfare and judicial systems in this country—women who have been punished when they should have
been supported. In my own city of Swansea, I spent two weeks during the summer recess talking to women who for whatever reason had served time in prison, and too many of those had suffered as a result of their time in prison. I heard harrowing stories that rendered me speechless; I desperately want to help these women. Yes, they committed crimes—they have never disputed that—but their punishment far outweighs the level of criminality. Prison sentences are harsh, but the subsequent loss of their home and, very often, their children is bitterly unfair.

Almost 4,000 women are in UK prisons, but only two are serving whole-life sentences: Rosemary West and Joanna Dennehv. For the vast majority of women in prison, there is life after prison, but there is a lack of support for them. The struggle they face on release is a grave concern. Housing is a huge problem: almost two thirds of women leaving prison will not have anywhere to live. Women released on the condition that they live in approved properties have the added difficulty of integrating into an unfamiliar community that is often hundreds of miles away from their family and loved ones.

Women who have served prison sentences often struggle to find work, and 90% are still unemployed a year after being released—a much higher figure than for men in the same position. All too often, money is tight and they find themselves reoffending because they cannot afford not to. I met a woman who had to sell her body to pay for a hotel room for the night. That should not be happening in modern society.

Too many women’s and children’s lives are being destroyed because of the judicial and rehabilitation system in this country. Women are sent to prison because there are no more suitable alternatives. When they are released—often after a very short time—they are homeless, unemployable and desperate ex-offenders with no support and little option but to reoffend to survive. These women need the Government to radically overhaul the support and the facilities available to aid their transition back into the community. They need help with housing, employment and social wellbeing to ensure that their lives do not become a vicious circle of reoffending, old mistakes and ruined futures.

4.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing this debate and succinctly setting the scene. I congratulate the hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on their contributions as well.

Many prison officers in my constituency have told me that things need to change in relation to women released from prison. The hon. Member for Ogmore referred to Northern Ireland, where ladies have a section in the dual prison for men and women. I understand that the Minister will talk specifically about England and Wales, but I will comment on the policies there.

The statistics about women in prison somewhat surprised me when I read them. The Library debate pack states: “There were 6,442 women admitted to prison in England and Wales after receiving an immediate custodial sentence in 2016/17. 40% were admitted for Theft offences, 19% for Summary non-motorising offences and 10% for Miscellaneous crimes against society... Of the 6,495 women sentenced admissions to prison in England and Wales in 2016/17, 4,035 (62%) were there to serve a sentence of less than or equal to six months”.

The statistics add the facts to the case that hon. Members have already made, and that other hon. Members will make. The debate pack also states: “Of the 6,669 women released from prison in England and Wales in 2016/17, 63% had been serving determinate sentences of less than or equal to 6 months... Between October 2014 and September 2015 around 84,277 women offenders were cautioned, received a non-custodial conviction at court or released from custody in England and Wales. Around 15,662 of these offenders committed a proven re-offence within a year. This gives an overall proven reoffending rate of 18.6%”. That is less than the rate for men, which was almost 25% in 2014-15, but still indicates that something needs to be done differently. Other hon. Members have indicated in their constructive and helpful comments—we are not here to criticise, but to be constructive—some of the changes that they would like to make.

I was interested to read the following in the debate pack: “In September 2015 the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) published Better Outcomes for Women Offenders, its commissioning principles for women offenders.” Those principles, which I agree with, are based on seven identified priority needs. The first is substance misuse, a malady and a difficulty that many people are subject to: “Stabilise and address individual need, in particular address class A drug use, binge and chronic drinking.” As hon. Members have pointed out, if we do not address substance misuse in prison and follow up on it afterwards, we will not be doing anything to solve the problem or help.

The second identified priority need is mental health, which I have a particular interest in and have often spoken about in the House because it is so important: “Expedite access to services that address mental health need, in particular anxiety and depression, personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and trauma.”

Many women in prison have needs that fall into those categories. We can try to assist them while they are doing their time, but where is the follow-up once they get out? Without it, anxiety, depression and other problems with personal circumstances will take over.

The third identified priority need is emotion management: “Help women to build skills to control impulsive behaviour and destructive emotions.”

Again, we can give some help in prison, but we need the follow-up afterwards. Teaching anger management and self-control can help to change lives. It is not about dictating change, but helping people to create it within themselves.

The fourth identified priority need is a pro-social identity: “Be positive towards, about, and around women, and encourage them to help and be positive towards others.” If we always tell people off and do them down, they can never lift themselves up. It is important for society to give people who have made terrible mistakes and ended up in prison the chance to rebuild their lives.

The fifth identified priority need is being in control of daily life and having goals: “Motivate women to believe that they belong and fit in to mainstream society, where they can work to achieve their goals.”
We need to encourage them, be positive and give them employment and training opportunities and a chance to be part of society and move forward.

The sixth identified priority need is to improve family contact:

“Help women to build healthy and supportive family relationships, especially with the children.”

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston also referred to family contact. Family can help people so much to cope with life.

The final priority need is to resettle and build social capital:

“Help women to find somewhere safe to live, to learn how to manage their money, access education, and improve their employability.”

All these things tie into giving people a second chance and making sure that they can be part of society. Sending people back where they lived before sometimes means sending them back to the same problems, so in some cases they may need to go somewhere different.

I look to the Minister for a positive response. I feel that we are missing the targets that we should be aiming for. How does he intend to address and implement the changes to help to rehabilitate offenders and secure family units with a mother at home who is aware of how she can do things differently, with plenty of the support that is so necessary?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I shall call the first Front-Bench speaker at 5.09 pm, in order to give the mover of the motion time for a brief response at the end.

4.59 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing this important debate.

At Justice questions in September, the prisons Minister, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), told me that,

“the Government have a duty of care to everyone we hold in custody.”—[Official Report, 5 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 21.]

I wholeheartedly agree. Yet the loss of 316 lives in our prison system last year, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) referred to, shows that too often that duty of care is not being met, and that our prisons are sometimes not fit for purpose.

Deaths in custody lead to the headlines when we talk about health and wellbeing in prisons, but when we read between the lines we discover a more startling picture of the fragile state of healthcare within the prison estate. Women in custody are five times more likely to have a mental health concern than women in the general population, 46% of them reporting having attempted suicide at some point. Also, in some prisons around half of healthcare appointments are being missed due to a lack of prisoner escorts.

Last week, in the main Chamber, I spoke of the difficulties of accessing services when someone has no fixed abode; the same can often be said of women leaving prison. At least four in 10 women leave the justice system having no accommodation arranged for their release, and having no accommodation often leaves these women facing difficulty in finding employment, a battle to gain local authority help and support, and even a struggle to do something as simple as to obtain a mobile phone.

I know from my experience as a GP that many women leaving custody find themselves alone and destitute, with no support networks in place. Due to the lack of transitional support, I myself have even had to resort to funding overnight accommodation for those left homeless upon release from prison, so that they do not have to risk their life by sleeping rough.

It does not have to be that way. Prisons literally present us with a captive audience and a host of opportunities to help people to transition back into society. If instead of locking up women as a punishment we invested in unlocking their potential, we would have more of these women out of custody long-term, we would have more mothers back with their children and—crucially—we would have more women contributing to our economy instead of contributing to the cost of the prison estate.

A prison system fit for purpose would ensure that we equip those in custody with the education and skills they need to get back on their feet and into employment; a prison system fit for purpose would provide better support on housing, linking those in custody with charities and other housing providers to keep them off the streets; and on healthcare, a prison system fit for purpose would ensure that prisoners’ health conditions are addressed, prevented, supported and brought under control, so that we would reduce the burden on our NHS in the longer term and have a healthier society.

We should not have to hear horror stories of women leaving prison with nothing more than a cheap sleeping bag and a list of problems that is larger than when they started their sentence. The challenge is not straightforward—we can all accept that—but tackling it requires a better joined-up approach from the Government and other partners. It cannot simply be an afterthought or something that we leave to charities alone to solve.

I urge the Minister to listen to these concerns and to work with his colleagues in Government to bring about the changes needed within our justice system, to ensure that women are better supported upon release from it.

5.3 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on obtaining this debate and on putting the issues so succinctly, especially highlighting the fact that we need to question whether incarceration is always the right response to female offenders, and indeed to all offenders. Clearly there are serious offenders who must be incarcerated, but for less serious crimes we need to consider alternative modes of disposal.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) spoke very strongly about the issues, based on her own hard work in and long experience of this area, and she spoke very movingly about the very real issue of deaths in custody and female suicides. She also spoke about the need to transform the way that we
rehabilitate women, and about the need to address the issue of the funding that is required to do so. Topically, given today’s debate in the main Chamber, she also spoke about the need to address universal credit issues for women leaving the prison estate.

The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) again emphasised the importance of resources for support and counselling, and raised the genuine issue of the homelessness of many women who leave our prisons across the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made the point that prison officers in his constituency who serve in the system see the need for reform, and the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) emphasised the duty of care that is owed to these women, as well as the great importance of tackling mental health issues.

This is a devolved matter, and in Scotland we have faced similar challenges. The Scottish Government have worked to support the effective reintegration and rehabilitation of women released from prison. To do that, they put together the reducing reoffending change fund, which funds a number of services that provide mentoring support to women in the criminal justice system—in particular, to women leaving prison. They also looked closely at the issue of short custodial sentences, and there is now a presumption in Scots law against short custodial sentences for all prisoners. The idea is that it is easier to rehabilitate people if they do not serve a short custodial sentence. The Scottish Government are doing work in that area.

Let us be frank: Scotland has a serious problem with the number of people incarcerated. In 2015, women made up more than 5% of the prison population in Scotland. That is the second-highest female prison population in northern Europe. Only Spain has a higher female prison population. In response to that issue, a commission was set up under the former Lord Advocate of Scotland—my boss in another life—Dame Elish Angiolini, who looked into how to improve outcomes in Scotland for women in the criminal justice system. She published a report in 2012, which made many wide-ranging recommendations, including the establishment of community justice centres, which offer a one-stop support network for women, the introduction of nationwide mentoring services to support women’s compliance with court orders, and alternatives to remand—a disproportionate number of women end up on remand. She also recommended that the women’s prison—the main women’s facility in Scotland—be replaced with a small specialist prison for women serving long-term sentences and smaller units for women on shorter-term sentences. The Scottish Government have begun to implement those changes. We should pay tribute to the campaigners for penal reform and feminist groups that called for those changes over a long period and were able to influence the system in Scotland.

When we discussed the issue of prisons in England and Wales in the Chamber recently, I invited the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), to visit the prison system in Scotland. I am not sure he has yet been able to carry out that visit, and he very generously did so. I extend that invitation to the Minister. I am not saying the situation is perfect, but we have moved forward and taken the Angiolini report’s recommendations on board. Hon. Members have argued today that the UK Government should similarly take on board the Corston report’s recommendations.

The Scottish Government are also supporting rehabilitation services in the community. I would like to mention Willow, which services women in my constituency and across Edinburgh and the Lothians. It provides a range of services for women who are returning from prison to the Edinburgh or Midlothian area. It is a partnership between NHS Lothian, the City of Edinburgh Council and the Scottish Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders. It aims to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of women leaving prison, enhance their access to services and reduce their offending behaviour. It is an excellent facility—one of many that are springing up in Scotland. I am interested to hear from the Minister whether similar facilities will be funded by the sort of cross-government and local government partnerships that have been set up in Scotland.

The impact of CRCs is specifically felt by female offenders as probation has lost the vital one-to-one support that the Women in Prison campaign sees as crucial to reducing reoffending and securing better services and employment. Instead, the focus is on cheaper group work, which simply fails to provide the same benefits and leaves women without the tailored support that they need. However, rather than address the concerns raised about CRCs, the Government are rewarding failure by awarding them a further £277 million in funding. The decision to privatise probation has also meant an end to the ring-fenced funding for women offenders who leave prison, leaving provision dependent on local commissioning arrangements and creating a postcode lottery of post-release support.

Women are also being let down by the penal system before release, with a shameful lack of support in prisons, which makes it no easier to find homes or employment on the outside. Between prisons, there is significant variation in the quality of training courses, with many failing to offer wide-ranging vocational courses, and many the reformers have nothing to overcome gender stereotypes. Many do not provide enough IT-related courses to teach skills that are vital to obtain employment in the 21st-century marketplace. That provision may be bad,
but 70% of women in prison—those serving less than six months—have little to no access to courses at all, leaving them without enough support to find secure employment.

Although recent changes have led to all women's prisons being labelled as resettlement prisons, progress on shifting the focus is slow and there is no overarching system to help offenders into employment. The housing support provided to offenders after release also varies dramatically between prisons. Although some women may have nowhere to go, the rules surrounding housing, the lack of provision and the absence of joined-up services mean that some do not. Some women may try to get into approved premises, but they are only available for specific offenders and are limited in number. Others may try to secure council housing, but there are shortages and specific criteria. More may attempt to find accommodation in the private rented sector, which is unaffordable, with landlords often unwilling to rent to ex-offenders. More worryingly, women who have suffered domestic or sexual violence may return to their abusive partners. The lack of support for housing is putting those women in grave danger.

What runs through the heart of the rules is a failure to take on board the Select Committee on Justice's acceptance that women face very different hurdles from men. The Government are doing nothing to provide a distinct approach to the specific needs of female offenders, and are instead continuing with badly managed programmes that are often not fit for purpose in the first place, let alone fit to meet specific needs.

The Government say they will produce a long-overdue strategy for female offenders. It must be specifically tailored to women's needs, and not just be a rehash of existing policies with a female spin. It has to look seriously at whether prison is the right place for some women. The many cases in which women reoffend because of the appalling lack of support do not serve the best interests of women or of society.

I want to hear from the Minister what he is doing to ensure that women have access to a greater range of employment courses and that those serving short sentences have access to them, so that they can get a job; what he is doing with colleagues to overturn some of the ridiculous housing rules and biases against female offenders, so that after release they will have a roof over their head; why the follow-up report to the Corston report has been so damning; and what the Government are doing to fully implement the report's recommendations to prevent women from reoffending. When will the Minister or his colleagues publish their strategy for female offenders? Crucially, what will that strategy entail? Can he assure me that it will look seriously at the range of sentencing options available for female offenders?

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing a debate on such an important subject. He and many other speakers have made thoughtful and informative contributions and have raised several pertinent points that I will respond to.

I share many of the concerns that have been raised today. Female offenders are some of our most vulnerable members of society and often have complex needs. A significant number of the female prison population are indeed victims of difficult circumstances. They often face mental health issues, substance misuse problems, domestic abuse and homelessness. Those are all issues that need to be addressed during and on release from prison if we want to reduce reoffending and enable the women to have a chance to reintegrate back into their communities.

Our statistics show that almost half of women reoffend after leaving custody. That is not acceptable. I do, of course, recognise the concerns raised by the September 2016 Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation thematic report on women's services in the community. The report acknowledged that there were examples of excellent work, but that it was inconsistent. It was also encouraging that the majority of women interviewed felt that their involvement with probation services had helped reduce their likelihood of reoffending.

We accept that aspects of probation delivery, including through-the-gate services, are not meeting our expectations. As the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), made clear in July, we have already taken action to make the contracts with community rehabilitation companies to better reflect the costs to providers of delivering core services. We are continuing to work with providers to explore further action that we might take to ensure that services protect the public, rehabilitate offenders and deliver the sentences of the court.

Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service contract management team has reviewed the compliance of CRCs against gender-specific contractual requirements. Although in general CRCs are adhering to their obligations, we are working with them to identify the necessary actions required to improve delivery and outcomes for women offenders. It is important, too, that women who are being supervised by the national probation service on licence have access to the interventions that will help build and sustain their rehabilitation. HM Prison and Probation Service is looking at the interventions provided to women in custody and in the community to identify any gaps or deficits, but also to ensure that staff maximise the use of interventions that are currently available.

The Transforming Rehabilitation reforms extended post-release supervision to some 40,000 offenders serving short custodial sentences, who previously received no support from probation on release. They also introduced through-the-gate services to help released offenders to resettle in the community. We know that, with the extension of supervision to offenders serving short custodial sentences, the number of recalls of women has increased.

Although it is important that a community order or post-custodial licence is properly enforced, we also need to support women to reduce unnecessary recall. We have therefore taken forward specific work to ensure we engage effectively with female offenders to improve compliance with an order or licence. This includes offering female offenders the option of a female offender manager if that suits them best; issuing a practice guidance document on working with women offenders to probation staff to help them to consider issues specific to female offenders; updating our instructions to probation
staff on offender childcare to support access to childcare provision to facilitate engagement in supervision and specified activities, thus supporting female offenders to complete the requirements imposed upon them where childcare issues were previously a barrier; better supporting staff by providing additional guidance to inform their consideration of the thresholds to recall by, and, where viable, to make alternative decisions to improve engagement and compliance; and looking at how to best train prison and probation staff on how to most effectively engage with women and to work with them in a way that takes into account their previous experiences of trauma. Evidence indicates that if we do so, we are more likely to achieve effective outcomes and increase their compliance with their community order or post-custodial licence.

Concerns have been raised today about the sustainability of women’s centres. We recognise the important role that women’s centres can play in supporting female offenders, and those at risk of offending, to address their often complex needs and turn their lives around. We are investing £1 million in seed funding between 2016 and 2020 for local areas to develop new ways of working with female offenders by adopting a joined-up multi-agency approach and bringing together services at each stage of the criminal justice system. That model, often termed a whole-system approach, brings together local agencies and criminal justice—statutory and voluntary—to take a joined-up approach to providing the holistic, targeted support that a female offender needs, with shared investment and outcomes.

Women’s centres are at the heart of many of those models. The national probation service and CRCs are key partners, ensuring that female offenders receive targeted, wraparound support, both through the gate and in the community. I strongly believe that locally led services are more effective in addressing the needs of vulnerable women. The first whole-systems approach model in Greater Manchester has been fully operational since January 2015. The model includes police triage, a problem-solving court, and support alongside community orders and on release from prison. Although we cannot conclude that the model has had a direct impact, there has been a reduction in the number of adult women prosecuted, and in the number given custodial sentences in Greater Manchester in 2016. Learning from Greater Manchester and our other grant-funded areas will inform our future work.

There is considerable evidence of a link between a lack of stable accommodation and reoffending, with suitable accommodation playing an important part in enabling offenders to get a job or get into training, and to get registered with a GP. HMPPS has undertaken some initiatives to improve access to accommodation, such as expanding the bail accommodation and support services contract to offer accommodation to offenders on licence. We continue to work with all probation providers to ensure that offenders get the support that they need to find accommodation on release.

Accommodation is, however, a serious problem that requires a cross-departmental response. We are working with the Department for Communities and Local Government on a number of its housing priorities, including the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Through the duty to refer, all prisons and probation providers will be subject to a new duty to refer someone they support who might be at risk of becoming homeless to the local housing authority.

I want to mention the work that we are doing to improve health outcomes. We are looking closely at what more we can do to improve support and continuity of care and treatment when someone leaves prison. One example is the change we made to allow prisoners to register with a GP prior to their release from prison, to facilitate a timelier transfer of information from prison to GP practices. That sounds like a simple change, but I know from my professional experience what a difference it can make.

The number of self-inflicted deaths is thankfully reducing, but six women still died in prison in the 12 months to June 2017. All deaths in custody are a tragedy, and I am acutely aware of the need to do more to meet the needs of women in our care. The incidence of self-harm is also still unacceptably high, and disproportionate compared with men. We are acting on the initial results from the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody’s rapid information-gathering exercise on preventing the deaths of women in prison.

Action we have already taken includes making improvements to prison reception areas and first-night provision. We have also updated and improved the assessment, care in custody and teamwork process for supporting at-risk prisoners, and we have strengthened the suicide and self-harm training for staff, and for ACCT case managers. Juliet Lyon, the author of the report, also looked at what more could be done for women before their release from prison. She noted that the run-up to release could be particularly stressful as women consider all aspects of their life that have been on hold while they have been in prison. I met with Juliet only recently.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) always makes an informed contribution to these debates and I thank her for that. We have been reviewing and, as I have already said, have changed the contracts around CRC. The Department continues to assess the performance of probation, particularly for women because there have been difficulties. I met with DCLG this morning to discuss accommodation.

Regarding the points made by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), I fully recognise the complexity of the women involved and their needs. Every prisoner I have met has appeared vulnerable to me, whatever their crime. The hon. Lady said that there are two whole-life sentences, but there are a greater number of restricted prisoners in the country. It should be noted that more than 2,000 women currently held in custody are there for more than 12-month sentences, so there is no easy fix, and we need to maintain some perspective.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made reference to substance misuse and mental health care access. As a practising doctor, I am aware of that. Indeed, I am fully aware of the difficulties in seeking appropriate mental health care within prisons, continuity of care on leaving prison and access to appropriate substance misuse and acogranmes. I have been doing my bit to go into bat for the Department on that with the Department of Health, which ultimately carries responsibility for those services.
The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) kindly invited me to visit Scotland, but I am already going. I was going to go last week, but I am now going in December. I was very impressed by the presentation we had by people from the Scottish Parliament and Scottish civil service on the quite impressively bold approach on women’s justice that is being embarked upon in Scotland. I very much look forward to visiting.

Finally, in terms of the Government’s strategy for female offenders, one issue that was raised in the thematic report on women’s services by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation was the lack of a strategic focus on women. I am pleased to say that we have made progress. In April this year, Sonia Crozier was appointed executive director for probation and women. The creation of that role provides an excellent opportunity to focus on the needs of women in a more holistic way across prisons and the community. I am also leading the development of a female offender strategy, which I intend to publish later this year. This debate has been helpful in informing that work and highlighting what else we need to do to improve outcomes for women in the community and custody.

5.26 pm

Chris Elmore: Thank you, Mr Howarth, for giving me the opportunity to respond. I start by thanking my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for their passionate contributions, which drew on their own experiences through casework and their work in the House through Women in Prison. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who I appreciate is here in her role as a Front-Bench spokesperson.

There has been a reasonable amount of consensus. I am grateful to the Minister for acknowledging many of our legitimate concerns, responding in a constructive manner and setting out what the Government are doing. Maybe he could ask some other Ministers to respond in such a constructive manner in other Westminster Hall debates.

There are ongoing accommodation issues that seem to link to lots of other problems. I was glad to hear the Minister respond to that point. I was also glad to hear him acknowledge that there is a lot more to be done. It is nice that he is not suggesting that these things can all be resolved overnight, but I appeal to him to keep Members informed of the work that the Ministry of Justice is doing. I acknowledge that there is cross-departmental work to be done, so he cannot solve everything all the time.

The Minister mentioned suicide rates. There were 10 female suicides last year. The rate is higher than among men. All suicide is unacceptable, as he said, but we still face a real and deep-rooted issue of women being deeply and adversely affected by a prison system that is not working for them. I am glad that the Minister acknowledges that, but we need to do more, which I accept he sees too.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered women released from prison.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall
Thursday 19 October 2017

[SIR DAVID AMESS IN THE CHAIR]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS
Carbon Capture and Storage

1.30 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered carbon capture and storage.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for granting this debate, and the sponsors who helped to secure it, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), whose support is deeply appreciated. I also thank the team at the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit for their help and Sarah Tennison at the Teesside Collective for her excellent advice. I congratulate the Minister on the production of the clean growth strategy and I support its core message that there does not have to be a trade-off between green energy and economic growth.

As the Minister noted in her announcement to the House last week, since 1990 the United Kingdom has simultaneously grown its economy by almost 70% and reduced its emissions by more than 40%. I also welcome the commitment that the UK will continue to be a world leader in creating clean technologies, jobs and businesses.

Chiefly, I am delighted with the new resolution to demonstrate international leadership in carbon capture, usage and storage. The benefits of carbon capture and storage are multiple. CCS will be essential in ensuring that the UK meets its legally-binding target to reduce carbon emissions by a minimum of 80% on 1990 levels by 2050 in a cost-effective manner. That was the conclusion of the Energy and Climate Change Committee, which I support its core message that there does not have to be a trade-off between green energy and economic growth.

The economic benefits of CCS stretch far beyond the cost-effective attainment of our carbon budgets. According to the House of Commons Library, CCS could create 60,000 jobs in the UK, not to mention the greater number of jobs that could be saved by avoiding the decline or closure of carbon-intensive industries, for which it will quickly become progressively less viable to remain in operation in the UK as levies on carbon emissions increase. Those industries emit carbon dioxide as an intrinsic part of their production methods, so regardless of how much we decarbonise our power supply, they will continue to be huge emitters. As the North East of England Process Industry Cluster, which represents the chemical industry in the north-east, warns, “on current trends and policies, industrial emissions reduction will only be met through the closure of industry.” That would be a totally avoidable catastrophe and we need to do everything in our power to prevent it, and that means developing CCS.

The International Energy Agency estimates that there will be a global CCS market worth over £100 billion. With even a modest share of that market, UK gross value added could increase to between £5 billion and £9 billion per year by 2030. The wider economic benefits and opportunities presented by CCS are huge, whether in the form of increased domestic manufacturing activity, a more positive balance of trade, or the possibility that UK carbon storage sites could generate income by storing emissions from other countries.

When it comes to the location for CCS, hon. Members will be unsurprised to learn that I think there is a natural choice: Teesside. That judgment is not born of the bias of someone who was born and grew up there, and is very proud to represent it, but based on a number of unique advantages that our area has to recommend it as a prime site for CCS development.

First, Teesside is home to nearly 60% of the UK’s energy intensive industry. Regional emissions per person are almost three times the UK average. Fully rolled out, CCS on Teesside would therefore have a substantial impact on overall UK emission reductions.

Secondly, Teesside has one of the highest concentrations of industry in the UK. That includes the specific and unique mix of companies that comprise the Teesside Collective. That group has come together with the excellent Tees Valley combined authority to drive the case for CCS investment in the area. The group includes Sembcorp Utilities, the area’s leading energy supplier; SABIC, one of the world’s largest makers of chemicals, fertilisers and plastics, whose Teesside operations alone emit 1.25 million tonnes of CO₂ every year; Lotte Chemical UK, which manufactures the plastic needed for soft drinks bottles; BOC, which produces more than half of the world’s largest makers of chemicals, fertilisers and plastics, whose Teesside operations alone emit 1.25 million tonnes of CO₂ every year; Lotte Chemical UK, which manufactures the plastic needed for soft drinks bottles; BOC, which produces more than half of the world’s largest makers of chemicals, fertilisers and plastics, whose Teesside operations alone emit 1.25 million tonnes of CO₂ every year; and CF Fertilisers, the UK’s largest ammonia fertiliser plant.

That integrated cluster is so important because the emissions from those facilities can be captured, mixed with emissions from a power station in the same area, and transported and stored together. Analysis by the Green Alliance found that this approach would reduce the cost per tonne of carbon captured by about two thirds, compared with the cost of doing it for a power station alone. The mixture of companies would also allow a test project to assess the cost of CCS when facing different levels of difficulty in the removal and extraction of carbon.

Thirdly, the cost of CCS would be further reduced by Teesside’s close proximity to North sea storage sites. A fortnight ago, I had a fascinating briefing from Professor Jon Gluyas and Simon Mathias of Durham University at Boulby potash mine in my constituency. The UK
storage appraisal project, which concluded in 2013, identified some 600 storage locations on the UK continental shelf—enough to store our direct emissions for the next 130 years.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned nitrogen fertiliser and the need to use carbon capture and storage to help create more fertiliser. At the moment we use a lot of natural gas to make this fertiliser. Therefore, it will be a win-win situation, because we will be reducing the amount of natural gas we use and using the carbon that is already being produced.

Mr Clarke: I agree with my hon. Friend that carbon utilisation is something we should look at. It is not necessarily the same as carbon capture and storage, but it is definitely a valuable mechanism to ensure we are not wasting carbon dioxide that we have to produce. Therefore I would certainly back that, as does the strategy.

Fourthly, Teesside is the prime location because developing industrial CCS would create an additional 1,200 jobs during its construction phase and help create and retain a further 5,900 jobs when in operation. That is vital in our area, where, as Opposition Members will attest, despite the huge progress that has been made, too many people are struggling to find secure and well-paid jobs. The Teesside workforce have the strong engineering skills required for CCS, largely as a result of long-standing expertise in the oil and gas, energy supply, and chemical and process sectors.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Teesside is ready to go. The Teesside Collective is ready to commence front-end engineering design—FEED—studies immediately and could be capturing and storing CO₂ in just six years. No further research or innovation is required. The Teesside Collective has already presented a cost-effective business case for both Government and industry to invest in a demonstration phase.

Last week, the Minister told me that Teesside makes a very powerful case for the funding set out in the clean growth strategy, of which £100 million has been committed to support CCUS innovation and deployment in the UK. That is greatly welcomed. She said that pints would be available for myself and the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), and I think she could be included in the round as well. However, can the Minister provide clarity as to what proportion of that investment will be spent on carbon capture and storage specifically, as opposed to carbon capture and utilisation, which was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish)? Although I can understand the rationale for investing in carbon utilisation, such as its relative ease of development and more direct economic gains, it does not allow us to store the same amount of carbon dioxide as carbon capture and storage, which I believe is the real prize.

In relation to CCS, specifically CCS on Teesside, I ask the Government to take three critical steps. First, just as the Government established the contracts for difference mechanism, which is the incentivised investment that led to the huge cost reductions we are witnessing in green energy, so too the Government need to come up with an incentive mechanism for industrial CCS. What would that look like in practice? There are two elements. We need a transportation and storage solution, and the Government need to state their intention to agree a financing mechanism. Stakeholders tell me that those are the two most important things they are asking for, without which there can be little practical progress on delivering CCS in the UK. The Teesside Collective very much hopes that such a model can be developed and agreed in 2018 and it has already done really impressive groundwork.

Secondly, please deliver FEED funding for a trial industrial CCS network on Teesside. The Teesside Collective has requested the relatively modest sum of £15 million to get a demonstration project under way and it hopes that that can be allocated in 2019. Government support for the deployment of such a strategic demonstration project will enable CCS to reduce costs significantly if and when it is built at commercial scale in the 2020s.

Thirdly, we need to establish the facts to show the rest of Government and the public why this matters so much. In its April 2017 report on CCS, the Public Accounts Committee stated:

“By the end of 2017, the Department should quantify and publish the impact across the whole economy of delays to getting CCS up and running, and of it not being established at all.”

Will the Minister inform us whether such analysis has been commissioned and, if so, when the Department will publish the results?

Those are my three asks, which I sincerely and deeply hope are deliverable. I have come into politics to try to help deliver many things: a stronger economy; a world that we can pass on to our children in better shape than we found it; and a change in people’s perceptions of Teesside and what it has to offer our country and our world. I am an unashamed evangelist for the latter, as are so many of the people who work there. Carbon capture and storage would allow us to deliver all those objectives. I urge the Minister, as I urge all colleagues: let us seize this opportunity, and seize it today.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as always, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) for securing this debate and for his powerful contribution.

Carbon capture and storage is a technology with huge importance for our industry, energy and our climate challenges. It has huge potential to bring investment and jobs to Teesside, which is why I am so pleased to be joined today by so many colleagues from the Tees valley area. I welcome the shared cross-party ambition to see the UK leading the way by introducing CCS into our national infrastructure.

Following the clean growth strategy, which the Government published recently, I hope that this debate will help to reinforce the case for making progress. Earlier this year, I pressed the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd)—the then industry Minister—on the need for some clear Government leadership to help to get the technology off the ground, and I am delighted to see the project reignited in the clean growth strategy and the promise of a CCS demonstration project. I sincerely hope to see that
responsibility granted to the Teesside Collective in my constituency—a project ready and waiting to start decarbonising UK industry.

Meeting our commitments to reduce emissions under the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Paris agreement while protecting and expanding British industry is a serious challenge. The fifth carbon budget commits to a 57% reduction from 1990 levels by 2030. The easiest and most cost-effective solution to this challenge is, without doubt, CCS.

Research by the Committee on Climate Change has shown that CCS could virtually halve the costs for the UK of meeting emissions targets. The UK is especially well placed to be a leader in the industry, not least because of storage space in our depleted oilfields just off our coasts, but the clock is ticking. The UK has fallen down the Global CCS Institute’s readiness index in the past two years, due to a “lack of clear CCS policy”.

The Committee on Climate Change has also been clear that we must develop this technology in the coming years so that we are ready for a full-scale operation in the 2030s.

There is also an urgent need to stay competitive with our continental partners, which is particularly important post-Brexit. In fact, getting ahead on CCS could be the competitive edge that we need to attract inward investment. If we delay, we will see that investment lost to other countries who get ahead. For example, this year Norway announced the award of contracts for full-scale carbon capture at cement, ammonia and waste-to-energy plants. In 2016, Toshiba completed construction of a carbon capture facility at a waste incineration plant in Saga city, and the world’s first large-scale carbon capture facility in the steel industry was launched in Abu Dhabi. The Dutch Government has committed to CCS and handling 20 million tonnes by 2030 from industrial sites. Rotterdam is one of the biggest industrial zone competitors, so it is vital for Teesside to get ahead.

The difficulties we have experienced in the steel industry, where energy cost pressures are higher than those faced by our European competitors, are a warning of what is to come if we do not get serious about industry decarbonisation. As my neighbour, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, has mentioned, our region has huge CCS potential. The Teesside Collective project could become one of Europe’s first clean industrial zones.

Yesterday, I attended the launch of the South Tees mayoral development corporation’s strategic masterplan for the future of the former SSI steel site. At 2,000 acres, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to attract global investment and to become a hub for new industries and technologies. We could genuinely create a world-renowned site for clean industry with CCS at its heart.

Teesside is home to nearly 60% of the UK’s major energy users in the process and chemical sectors. The internationally renowned North East of England Process Industry Cluster—NEPIC—represents chemical-based industries in the region, but particularly those concentrated in Teesside. The sector generates £2.6 billion of annual sales, £12 billion of exports and is the north-east’s largest industrial sector. BOC, one of the Teesside Collective partners, operates the UK’s largest hydrogen plant, which produces over half the UK’s hydrogen. If we are to convert our gas grids to hydrogen—as Leeds is currently exploring—CCS on Teesside would need to be a key part of that decarbonisation strategy. Another Teesside Collective partner, Lotte Chemical, could be an excellent plastic for the soft drinks industry. CCS could capture over 90% of its carbon output, essentially decarbonising the soft drinks materials supply chain.

The density of our industry makes us a heavy emitter of carbon dioxide—it is three times the national average and accounts for more than a fifth of all UK industrial emissions. That makes us especially vulnerable to uncompetitive energy prices and carbon price pressures relative to other countries, but it also makes us a prime candidate for CCS, because the technology could drastically cut a very significant proportion of UK emissions. If we combine that with our close proximity to the North sea industry and potential storage sites in depleted oil fields, it means that Teesside would be one of the most efficient and cost-effective locations for a test case. The technology would help us to maintain and even enhance the comparative advantage we already have in chemicals and process industries. Or, to put it another way, without support to decarbonise our industry, we risk seeing the problems at the SSI steelworks happen in our other sectors.

NEPIC estimates that the use of CCS could create and safeguard almost 250,000 jobs by 2060, and 7,000 new jobs could be created in Teesside for the building and operating of facilities alone. The House of Commons Library estimates that CCS could sustain up to 60,000 jobs and deliver a £160 billion economic boost by 2050 if it is delivered along the east coast. Teesside is ready and waiting to face the carbon reduction challenge and could be capturing and storing CO$_2$ within six years.

The Teesside Collective has costed engineering for three industrial plants and presented to Government the business case for an initial CCS hub in Tees valley. Its proposals are for a cost-effective introduction strategy, with companies capturing and storing 11 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over 15 years. That would then expand to include power stations and more industrial companies as the network demonstrates its worth. It estimates that a pilot could repay up to £31 million a year to the Government in carbon savings.

The Government have understandably been concerned about cost and value for money for the taxpayer, which unfortunately led to the disappointing decision in 2015 to cancel the £1 billion CCS competition. I am glad that the Government have changed their view and recognised that CCS is a technology where, for relatively small up-front investment, greater savings in reducing carbon can be made down the line.

The Oxburgh review noted that investing in CCS now would deliver the lowest cost to the consumer and that heavy costs would follow if it kept being delayed. I truly welcome the Government’s commitment of £100 million in the strategy, and I hope that some of that will support the £15 million FEED—front-end engineering design—study requested by the Teesside Collective. The Oxburgh review suggests that CCS on a power station could be constructed at a cost of £85 per megawatt-hour under state ownership, which is lower than Hinkley Point’s £102.5 per megawatt-hour. Those costs would be even lower for industrial clusters. Analysis by Green Alliance, for instance, suggests that costs in that context could be cut by two thirds, making it comparable to
wind and solar power. The Teesside Collective already has two industrial plants producing pure CO\textsubscript{2}, and therefore requiring no additional capture facilities at all.

The important thing is that business and Government work together to devise a sustainable funding model that does not place unsustainable costs or risks on the partner business or consumers. One crucial element missing from the clean growth strategy is the lynchpin for starting any major CCS project in the UK: work on transportation and storage. The report of the parliamentary advisory group on CCS stated:

“The lowest cost CO\textsubscript{2} storage solution for the UK at the scale required will be offshore geological storage in UK territorial waters.”

The group also cautioned:

“The state will need to take an enhanced role in managing storage risk if costs are to be minimised.”

Teesside is well placed for that, given its location and links with the oil industry, but work needs to start on developing the infrastructure soon, so that a cost-effective model can be found.

As the Government acknowledge in the clean growth strategy, the success of the offshore wind cost reduction taskforce provides a good model for the cost challenge taskforce on CCS. However, as NEPIC has argued, that success was based on Government investment through a clear marketplace and a funding model that provided the certainty that investors need. Both the Oxburgh report and the Green Alliance report recommend contracts for difference or similar for financing the storage infrastructure to achieve that.

The strongest message that I want to send to the Government is: let us get moving on this as soon as possible. The Public Accounts Committee cautions that the UK has already missed opportunities, and we cannot afford to lose any more. It is crucial for our energy and climate strategy, but it is also a chance for Britain to take a world lead in a cutting-edge industry, future-proof our industries, protect jobs and create new ones. Teesside stands ready and willing to get to work and make it happen.

1.50 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on securing this debate. His timing is spot on, given the publication last week of the clean growth strategy.

We last held a debate in this Chamber on carbon capture and storage on 24 January. From my perspective, the outcome of that debate was disappointing, but nine months on, I believe that we are in a much better place. A framework is beginning to emerge within which carbon capture and storage in the UK can become a major industry, and we are learning lessons from the aborted second CCS competition.

I believe that the Government are studying closely the proposals in the noble Lord Oxburgh’s report of September 2016. I was on his advisory committee, which heard the evidence, drafted and approved the report, and I believe that it is a good blueprint for the future. We see carbon capture and storage as fitting in well with the 10 pillars of the Government’s industrial strategy; it ticks all the boxes. Finally, the publication last week of the clean growth strategy provides the much-needed road map that business is looking for in order to invest time and money in carbon capture and storage.

Invariably in debates such as this, Back-Bench MPs have an ask of the Government, which we look to the Minister to take on board and respond to. However, from my own perspective, with the publication of the clean growth strategy last week, the Government have, to a large degree, shot my fox. I shall briefly set out the case for CCS and why it is so important that it is at the heart of the UK’s industrial strategy.

The UK has legally binding commitments, set out in the Climate Change Act 2008, to reduce carbon emissions by a minimum of 80% from 1990 levels by 2050. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Committee on Climate Change have both pointed out, if we do not deploy CCS, it will be very difficult to meet that target cost-effectively.

The UK has a unique selling point that means we should be at the vanguard of the CCS movement. It is the thing that most colleagues in this room have in common, in that our constituencies adjoin it: the North sea. I believe that your seat also adjoins it, Sir David. In the North sea and the UK continental shelf, the UK has its own large, safe and secure offshore CO\textsubscript{2} storage vessel, in the rocks deep beneath UK territorial waters. It provides us with the least-cost form of storage on an industrial scale. Over the past 50 years, as a result of the development of the North sea oil and gas industry, the UK has acquired enormous expertise and experience that can be harnessed to deliver CCS.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in acknowledging and welcoming that the University of Aberdeen has world-leading experts at the forefront of research into carbon capture and utilisation? It is reflected in the fact that Aberdeen was the only UK university whose entry into the Carbon XPRIZE was accepted. It is developing technology to help create a solution to the damage that CO\textsubscript{2} can cause, such as using what is left as materials for furniture and so on. Does he welcome and acknowledge that?

Peter Aldous: Yes, I do. I am happy to acknowledge it. We have enormous, significant expertise and experience in the oil and gas sector, which can be used to deliver CCS, create jobs and—most importantly for the Government—generate revenue for the Exchequer. However, as the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) highlighted, time is of the essence. We need to get on with it. As a result of the lower oil prices that have prevailed for the past three years, the North sea is going through a period of transition and restructuring. We must move quickly to use assets that otherwise might be prematurely decommissioned.

As we have heard, CCS has an important role to play in delivering growth across the whole UK and in bringing jobs to coastal communities, which in recent years have
faced particular challenges with the decline of traditional industries. There are areas where clusters of energy-intensive industries are based—such as Scotland and the north-east on Teesside, as the hon. Member for Redcar highlighted—which could benefit significantly from CCS. That might not be the exact situation in my own constituency, but we have businesses in East Anglia that are part of the North sea supply chain, whether in oil and gas or in the emerging offshore wind sector, and that would benefit from the development of CCS.

The industrial strategy highlights the importance to the UK of cultivating world-leading sectors and being global pioneers in industries in which we have an advantage. CCS is one of those industries. We have the resources and the skills. It is an industry in which we can not only secure inward investment but, in due course, create significant export opportunities, building on the expertise that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) mentioned a minute ago.

On the resources and skills required for CCS, Norway is a country with which we have a great deal in common.

Mr Simon Clarke: On that point, we have had disappointing news from Norway this week. I spoke to the Teesside Collective to discuss what was going on there. It is important to put it on record that although the Norwegians have retreated somewhat in the scope of their ambition for when things will happen, they have not pulled out of CCS altogether. Effectively, they have found themselves in a minority Government situation—we can perhaps empathise—and that has made certain investment decisions rather harder to achieve, so they are looking to make them on more of a case-by-case basis. That is why the news has come out of Norway in the way that it has.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I talked this morning to representatives of Statoil, who emphasised that they are proceeding with CCS and that the situation is, dare I say, a fact of life with minority Governments.

We have a great deal in common with Norway. The Norwegians are also taking forward CCS, and they are slightly ahead of us. However, I emphasise that it is not a question of CCS taking place either in the United Kingdom or in Norway; it should be in both. We need to collaborate between our two countries to ensure that that takes place on the best possible terms and at the lowest possible price.

On that point, cost is the elephant in the room. CCS has founded on this particular rock in the past, and I am sure that there are some who say that it will do so again. However, I do not believe that that will be the case. The Oxburgh report showed that in the right circumstances, CCS can be delivered at £85 per megawatt-hour. It is also important to highlight what has happened in the offshore wind sector. Costs have decreased in the past three years from around £140 per megawatt-hour to just under £60. That has been achieved by the Government providing the framework for the delivery, and by the industry getting on with the job and building, rather than just talking.

With the clean growth strategy, the Government have provided a framework for CCS to develop. I look forward to more details from the Minister about the road map for turning this exciting vision into a practical reality. Doing so will not only make the world more resilient to climate change, but transform places and—most importantly—people’s lives.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and to the hon. Members who persuaded it to do so. It is a particular pleasure to follow my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carbon capture and storage, the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

My interest in the Government’s new approach to CCS in the clean growth strategy goes wider than Teesside, but I am pleased that new colleagues from our region are present, including the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill). They join the work that many of us have been doing for years to persuade the Government to get serious about CCS. I am surrounded by no fewer than five Teesside MP colleagues; 100% of us are here, and we are 100% behind the debate.

I hope my new Tees colleagues recognise that the Government’s reaffirmed commitment to CCS, two years after withdrawing £1 billion in funding, is only a small step along what will be a very long road if our country is truly to reap the benefits of carbon capture. We need more than tens of millions in investment; we need billions. We need big leaps, not tiny steps. Nevertheless, this new recognition of CCS is testimony not only to the impressive body of evidence that continues to emphasise the key role of CCS in delivering least-cost decarbonisation, but to the energy—no pun intended—and enthusiasm of the industry, which has kept up a steady drumbeat on CCS since November 2015. I pay tribute to the Carbon Capture and Storage Association for its work and for its support of the APPG.

In the clean growth strategy, the Government have recognised what the industry has been saying for years: CCS is vital to broad sections of the UK economy. Power aside, key industries such as steel, cement and refining are increasingly looking for ways to remain competitive in a low-carbon world. CCS offers the only solution for deep decarbonisation in these industries that helps to enable their sustainable future, which is crucial for regions such as the Humber, the north-west and Teesside.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): CF Fertilisers is based in my hon. Friend’s constituency, Stockton North, but also employs people in my constituency and in Middlesbrough. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) has a long-standing commitment to carbon capture and storage, but cannot be present because of a Front-Bench commitment.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) rose—

Dr Williams: My mistake.

CF Fertilisers uses as much gas every year as the city of Manchester. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) join me in calling on the Minister to acknowledge that carbon capture and storage is very much part of the future of CF Fertilisers?
Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. Having recently been at a meeting of the Panel of Chairs, I remind new Members that if they wish to intervene they must be present at the start of the debate. However, I know that Dr Williams spoke in the main Chamber earlier, and I realise that he cannot be in two places at once. Nevertheless, as a Clerk is sitting beside me, I thought I should point that out.

Alex Cunningham: My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) was indeed in the main Chamber earlier. So was I; I was in the smoking debate, trying to persuade our country to give up the weed.

I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The company he refers to consumes the same amount of gas at its other plant in Runcorn. It is crucial that CCS be spread across the country.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): May I address that question now, in case I forget later? The hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) is right to focus on the effect on companies such as CF Fertilisers. He will be pleased to know that I had a meeting with that company yesterday. We have had conversations on several issues, but the impact of this technology on its carbon dioxide emissions and its cost base is clear.

Alex Cunningham: I thank the Minister for that helpful intervention. I have seen companies across the area, including those that make up the Teesside Collective, working hard to decarbonise their processes, but engineering can only do so much. The Government appear to understand that. The clean growth strategy estimates that CCS could provide almost half the required emissions reductions in energy-intensive industries, helping them all on their way.

A recent study by Summit Power gives a simple explanation as to why the first CCS projects must begin operation in the 2020s: achieving the CCS capacity needed to meet the UK’s 2050 target requires a 30-year build-out rate. Any attempts to significantly shorten that period would place unrealistic expectations on the supply chain and the construction companies. The end result would either be a failure to meet the 80% target by 2050 or the deployment of alternative low-carbon solutions that are likely to be considerably more expensive. We need the first CCS projects to begin operation in the 2020s. Although the £100 million of funding to support that work is welcome, the Government will need to do much more if we are to realise our ambitions.

The Government’s recommitment to CCS sets out an ambition to deploy it at scale during the 2030s, which throws up some interesting questions. What exactly is meant by “at scale”? Does it mean deploying the first CCS projects in the 2030s, or does it mean that the projects will be up and running in the next five to 10 years and at the required scale 10 years later? To achieve large-scale deployment of CCS in the 2030s, it will be essential to have at least one phase, if not two phases, of operational projects in the 2020s to enable learning and cost reduction.

That was just one of the messages from yesterday’s APPG meeting, where we heard about CCS progress in three fantastic projects that could be the first building blocks in the construction of a world-leading CCS industry: the Caledonia Clean Energy project, the Teesside Collective and the Liverpool-Manchester hydrogen cluster. They are all in a strong position to get work under way to deliver projects that could be expanded or replicated with relative ease.

The Department is familiar with those projects and is providing some support, but the message to Government at that meeting was clear: each of the projects is costed, demonstrates relatively low cost and, most importantly, could make something happen quickly. The projects have invested heavily in development, worked with leaders in the field and done the numbers. Their plea was for the Government to come up with a timetable for decisions.

The Teesside Collective spells out what it needs in its briefing note, which the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland alluded to. It asks for the allocation of £15 million in capture plant FEED funding to enable it to develop phase 1 of the project. It wants support for investment in a suitable CO₂ store. It states that transport and storage costs will come down through new delivery models and that it is keen to work in partnership with Government to look at a cost-effective solution. It also wants the establishment of a funding mechanism to build and operate an industrial CCS network.

Will the Minister address those pleas and let us know what decisions we can expect from her? The industry desperately needs decisions. I invite her to attend a meeting of the all-party group early in the new year so that she can outline the Government’s thinking, listen to Members’ feedback and answer their questions.

I hope I will be forgiven for being a bit more parochial now. As other hon. Members have mentioned, NEPIC has identified Teesside as a location with a particularly strong competitive advantage in the deployment and commercialisation of CCS. My Teesside constituency is home to the Teesside Collective, a consortium of industries developing the first CCS project in the UK. Teesside has the workforce and the strong engineering skills required for CCS, largely as a result of long-standing expertise in the oil and gas, energy supply, chemical and process industries.

We know from the clean growth strategy that CCS has to do more than demonstrate carbon reduction and low cost. It also has to offer a competitive opportunity for the whole of the UK. There is every reason to believe that that aim can be realised. The UK has some of the best CO₂ storage capacity in the world, a world-class oil and gas industry with the ideal skill set for CCS, and industries already located together in key regions. The economic benefits of CCS could be immense, with the Summit Power report concluding that developing it in the UK could deliver an estimated £129 billion of benefits. The clean growth strategy includes a commitment to developing a deployment pathway for CCS in 2018, but there is no detail about how that pathway will be developed or about the actions that may be included, so I hope the Minister can help us in that regard.

To make sure that, come the 2020s, the first CCS projects are operational, the Government need to implement a number of key actions in this Parliament to kick-start CCS clusters in a number of key regions. Countries such as Norway and the Netherlands have come forward with strong commitments on CCS, and it is time for us to step up and take our place among the leading group of countries that are developing this transformational technology.
I am ambitious and optimistic about the potential that exists and I am encouraged that we seem to be moving in the right direction. However, in closing I reiterate three messages: we need huge leaps to be taken, not tiny steps; the Government need to publish a timetable for the decisions needed to make real progress; and there are good, costed projects ready to go that can make our country a world leader in carbon capture and in creating and protecting countless jobs. I hope that the Minister will help us do that.

2.11 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on leading today’s debate and speaking so eloquently about the benefits of carbon capture—and, of course, on throwing a strong pitch for his own constituency into the mix as well. In fact, all Members in this debate have spoken about the benefits of carbon capture, so I will not cover the ground that others have already covered, apart from perhaps touching on a couple of the points made. I will concentrate more on the policy.

As we know, carbon capture and storage has huge potential for decarbonising fossil fuels and it could be highly effective in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as we have heard from many Members today. However, it was telling that, in the last contribution, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) referred to “tiny steps”, because that is indeed what these are: tiny steps on the way.

In Scotland, the SNP Scottish Government are already consulting on a new climate change Bill, with proposals—all with interim targets for 2020, 2030 and 2040—for a 90% reduction by 2050. That is as far as the reduction can go under current scientific advice. The independent expert advice from the Committee on Climate Change has said that that is the limit of feasibility and at the moment there is not enough evidence to set a net zero target.

However, I would caution the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland. If he is successful and gets a promise about an installation, that others have already covered, apart from perhaps touching on a couple of the points made. I will concentrate more on the policy.

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However, I would caution the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland. If he is successful and gets a promise about an installation, there is an elephant in the room. It is not the white elephant of Hinkley Point, which I will refer to later; it is the elephant that is Peterhead, where there was a shameful decision by the UK Government to pull the plug on a long-planned development. Peterhead is not far from the Aberdeen South constituency and it is where we saw a hugely damaging decision being taken, without warning, that will create a legacy that will deter investment incentives and dent consumer confidence.

That decision was a manifesto betrayal. That should be key—it was in the Conservative manifesto that the project would go ahead, and the cost to the taxpayer was £100 million. Peterhead was set and ready to accept a £1 billion contract and expected 600 jobs. I would therefore caution the hon. Gentleman about getting too excited about any promises, because by axing that project at the 11th hour, George Osborne committed what can only be described as a betrayal of the people in Peterhead.

Even now, the commitment to CCS, welcome as this small U-turn is, is still fairly mealy-mouthed, because in the detail it says: “subject to cost reduction”. That is the bare minimum of commitment, and the Carbon Capture and Storage Association has pointed out that it is counter to the way that technology actually develops. We have to invest in order to get the experience to get the drive costs down, so it is very difficult to see how an energy policy cherry-picked in this way, with these announcements and selected U-turns, will really provide a cohesive way forward for the industry. And all the while, in the background, we have the expensive and regressive nuclear policy at Hinkley C.

The SNP Scottish Government support the Paris agreement’s zero-emissions aim and we are providing significant funding in Scotland to establish the feasibility of the Acorn CCS demo project at St Fergus. Incidentally, that project is also supported by EU science funding of €1.9 million, and with SNP Government support the low carbon and renewable industry has created 58,500 jobs. That was the figure in 2015, which was up by a third from 2014.

Claire Perry: I know that the marching orders for the SNP, if not always for the hon. Gentleman himself, is that its Members have to be as gloomy as possible about everything at all times, but it is, frankly, really very sad that he has made no reference today to the high-wind offshore floating wind plant, which is one of the most innovative and creative things that is being done. It is being done by the UK Government, because this area is not a devolved matter, as he knows. That has been done because of the combination of the policy, Government leadership and work with industry to drive down the costs of offshore wind, exactly as we propose to do with this technology. Let us look at what can be delivered and acknowledge that no country in the world is taking a major step into unrefined CCUS at the moment, and we want to do this together, so perhaps we could have just a bit more cheerfulness from north of the border.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to the Minister for her short speech, or lecture, about how we should look at Government policy. I believe it is quite common now for us to be told that we should just hope for the best—that we should all be doing a “rah-rah” and saying, “This is all going to be great in the future”. No amount of deflection from the Minister will get away from the point that the UK Government, at the 11th hour, cancelled the Peterhead project, with no warning to the people involved, and that is shameful. On the point of the floating wind farm, which was launched yesterday, she will be aware that Nicola Sturgeon was there, not only to welcome the project but to launch it officially.

By making these policies—by making these small U-turns and small concessions—the Government are doing some welcome things. However, we want to see further, more significant U-turns. We want to see a significant investment, because, as has been stated, it is time for a long-term, robust UK policy for a low-carbon future. That is needed urgently. I urge the Minister to come up with some actual details about what the Government are going to do in the future to deliver it.

2.18 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) for securing this debate. As an
[Mike Hill]  

MP who supports climate change initiatives and the reduction of carbon emissions. I am pleased that the Government are now recommitting to CCS as part of their clean growth strategy, in order to meet legally binding targets.

I am proud that in Hartlepool we are already one of the main suppliers of low-carbon energy to the national grid, and EDF is developing green technologies around the production and supply of electricity for a future beyond the life of the nuclear power stations.

While I am pleased that such work is being undertaken, I recognise that where we have more traditional coal and gas-fired power stations, we need to act swiftly to reduce emissions. CCS is a proven technology that can do that. The Tees valley has been identified as one of two energy-intensive industry clusters that would benefit from the development of CCS technologies. Further, our expertise and experience of working with the offshore oil and gas sector put us in prime position as a region to develop technologies for the use of depleted oilfields for the purposes of carbon storage.

I commend the Tees Valley combined authority, which is made up of four Labour council leaders, the Labour Mayor of Middlesbrough and the elected Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, for their efforts to secure CCS pathfinder status for the Tees valley. Success would not only bring much-needed jobs but much-needed investment into the area. If we are serious about meeting environmental targets, we must invest in initiatives such as CCS. As an industrial base located on the coast, Hartlepool and the wider Tees valley area are best placed to meet those needs.

2.20 pm

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. Like other Members, I congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on bringing forward this debate. He promoted Teesside and highlighted the possible economic benefits of CCS, including to the energy-intensive industries located there.

I had started to wonder what the Teesside Collective was. Before I came into the Chamber, I understood that it was the consortium looking to develop the project, but it is quite clear that the name could be applied to the Energy-intensive industries located there.

As the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) said, this is the second debate on CCS in this Chamber in a 10-month period. That shows how valuable CCS is deemed to be for climate control and emissions reduction. The debate has been somewhat more upbeat and optimistic than the debate in January, but I warn the Minister that, unashamedly,_iteration and for talking down the oil and gas industry in his area. Yes, the Scottish Government’s predictions in the White Paper had the future price of oil wrong—just like the UK Government and the Office for National Statistics had it wrong. The Scottish Government were somewhere between the two. We were not the only ones who got it wrong; economists got it wrong too. We admit that we got it wrong, but it is why the SNP has taken a different approach. It has been acknowledged and was repeated in the clean growth strategy that risk was an issue with these projects, but in the previous competition the real risk was the White Rose project, where the contractors involved could not apportion risk between themselves properly and could not provide a compliant bid. In the Peterhead project, Shell was able to manage the risk. The Government need to review that and find out why Shell said it could manage the risk and provide a compliant bid. That has important implications going forward.

**Ross Thomson**: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the White Paper on independence was wrong when it talked about the proceeds from oil and that the Deputy First Minister John Swinney was wrong when he said that there would be a second oil boom? As we are talking about U-turns, will the hon. Gentleman join me in calling on the First Minister to perform a U-turn on scrapping the energy jobs taskforce, because that is needed to support jobs in Aberdeen?

**Alan Brown**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and for talking down the oil and gas industry in his area. Yes, the Scottish Government’s predictions in the White Paper had the future price of oil wrong—just like the UK Government and the Office for National Statistics had it wrong. The Scottish Government were somewhere between the two. We were not the only ones who got it wrong; economists got it wrong too. We admit that we got it wrong, but it is why the SNP has taken a different approach. It has been acknowledged and was repeated in the clean growth strategy that risk was an issue with these projects, but in the previous competition the real risk was the White Rose project, where the contractors involved could not apportion risk between themselves properly and could not provide a compliant bid. In the Peterhead project, Shell was able to manage the risk. The Government need to review that and find out why Shell said it could manage the risk and provide a compliant bid. That has important implications going forward.
The National Audit Office report compiled after that decision confirmed that a total of £168 million was spent on the two CCS competitions with no tangible research and development outcomes to show for it. The Government may suggest that the contractors or personnel involved in the projects developed some expertise, but there is no guarantee that they will be involved in future projects. There is a risk that they will take their expertise elsewhere. That is why we need to go forward quickly.

Following the decision on Peterhead, there has been the withdrawal of funding for onshore wind and solar power, which has caused problems in those sectors, leading to a 95% drop in expenditure on renewables. There is a clear pattern, and I highlight that to remind the Government that investor confidence is low and it must be stimulated. They need to find a way forward.

The Government can find ways forward to manage risk. In the Thames tideway project, they underwrote risk to the value of £5 billion. Hinkley Point C had bonds of £2 billion underwritten, not to mention the fact that the National Audit Office estimates that the project will cost £30 billion. We must remember that, unlike the other contracts for difference awards, Hinkley has a 35-year lifespan and not the standard 15. It is clear that where there is Government will, there is a way. They need to find that will and way for carbon capture and storage. The hon. Member for Waveney talked about the Oxburgh report, which highlights that CCS can deliver an estimated strike price rate of £85 per megawatt-hour. That compares favourably with £92 per megawatt-hour for Hinkley.

Other Members have highlighted the estimate of the Committee on Climate Change that CCS could halve the cost of meeting the 2050 carbon reduction target. In that respect, I welcome the clean growth strategy, which the Government brought forward last week. As I said at the time, however, the strategy gives mixed messages. It states that CCS will be deployed subject to cost reductions, but we need clarity. What are the Government’s cost expectations and what is the expected trajectory once the initial project is up and running? We need to remember how that compares with the “sign at all costs” attitude taken towards Hinkley. The Government also need to state clearly how they expect CCS to be paid for. Members from Teesside have highlighted the need to find a suitable and robust payment mechanism that gives value for money.

I welcome the Government’s statement in the clean growth strategy that they “will work with the ongoing initiatives in Teesside, Merseyside, South Wales and”—importantly from our perspective—“Grangemouth”. However, they need to clarify what “work with” means. What is the real level of support that they will provide? It needs to be more than working with or providing token support. As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey highlighted, the St Fergus project in the north-east of Scotland is being supported by the Scottish Government and EU funding. When it comes to EU funding, what future funding are the UK Government going to allocate beyond the 2020 horizon? How do they see collaborative working going forward?

Due to the abrupt pulling of the previous competition, at great cost to the public purse, not only was the National Audit Office report undertaken, but the Public Accounts Committee also undertook an investigation. It made a number of recommendations; hopefully the Minister will advise us on how the Government will take them forward. First, the Committee recommended that the Government “set out in its Industrial Strategy the role that CCS can play”.

I am not sure that there is enough detail in the industrial strategy on that yet. The next recommendation was that “By the end of 2017, the Department should quantify and publish the impact across the whole economy of delays” to CCS and of its not having been implemented yet. The Committee recommended that an “Emissions Reduction Plan should set out a clear, joined-up strategy for deploying CCS”.

It also said that the Government need to look at different risk options for energy policies, that the Treasury should buy into the emissions reduction plan at the outset and that there is a need for less Treasury interference—the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy must actually make the decisions, rather than the Treasury intervening.

I hope that the Minister will respond to that, and advise whether the carbon capture, utilisation and storage cost challenge taskforce that is to be put forward will consider those aspects. I welcome the setting up of that taskforce. Will she also confirm how experts will be selected and incorporated into the taskforce, and what the terms of reference from the Government will be?

It is laudable that the clean growth strategy reiterates that we want to see the implementation of CCS. As the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) asked, what does large-scale CCS in the 2030s mean, what is the pathway to that, and what projects do we need to see on board before then? The mention of supporting hydrogen production is also laudable; that is certainly a good way forward. I would also highlight the fact that Scotia Gas Networks is looking to run demonstration trials up in Scotland, to see how that will work in a domestic setting.

It is laudable to say that the UK aims to be a global leader, but to be a global leader we need to lead from the front. We need financial commitment, drive and determination, and we need to see a clear way forward soon. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

2.31 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Surrounded as I am by what we now know is a Teesside collective, who look out on to the North sea, I cannot offer quite such a spectacular view from my constituency. I have a view on to the English channel, which is of course rather less bracing for a dip this time of year, but does not share the North sea’s potential for CCS in the future.

It was good to hear this afternoon from Members across the House about that potential, in terms of what is in Teesside—both in its own right and in conjunction with what is in the North sea. As a country, we must play a role in, among other things, making sure that after the exploitation of the North sea for oil and gas, the industry continues. That can be done by ensuring that the plant, the connections and the various other things currently in the North sea are turned around over the coming period, so that we are the leading country in Europe and the world for storing carbon as
[Dr Alan Whitehead]

well as capturing it—perhaps offering that facility to not only our own country, but all the countries bordering the North sea and more widely.

In that context, it is interesting that that is precisely where Norway is now going. Statoil has been fairly busy recently; I met with its representatives just the other day. It was good to hear from them that although there have been setbacks in the process of getting the Norwegian project under way, it is very much still on track. The aim is to develop the Troll field, essentially as the first part of a European-wide process of storage of carbon in the North sea. They are currently looking at processes of barging captured carbon to an onshore site in Norway and then pipelining it out.

Alex Cunningham: The development in Norway is an illustration of why the UK needs to get on its bike and get moving. Yesterday, at the all-party parliamentary group meeting, it was revealed that the cost for projects in this country might be as low as £40 or £60 a tonne, but going to a third party might cost us £100 a tonne. That is an economic argument in favour of our own comprehensive storage.

Dr Whitehead: My hon. Friend has exactly anticipated, in rather more eloquent terms, what I was about to say almost immediately. The pace of the Norway project illustrates that we should get our act together as early as possible in making sure that we have the lead on the whole process in the North sea, for all the reasons that my hon. Friend mentions—cost, expediency and proximity. This unparalleled opportunity will probably not come again. If, for example, we close down all the capped wells and sites in the North sea as the oil begins to diminish, we will have lost that opportunity to be world leaders in the North sea. Action needs to be undertaken now, or in the very near future.

I endorse everything that has been said by pretty much everybody in the Chamber today about the importance of carbon capture and storage for the future. I cannot do better than describe it in the exact words of the Committee on Climate Change:

“Carbon capture and storage (CCS) is very important in meeting the 2050 target at least cost, given its potential to reduce emissions across heavy industry, the power sector and perhaps with bioenergy, as well as opening up new decarbonisation pathways (e.g. based on hydrogen).”

The committee goes on, in that report, to talk about the cost of not doing anything as far as carbon capture and storage is concerned over the coming period, which hon. Members have discussed.

The Committee on Climate Change sees carbon capture and storage as absolutely essential. That is what it said in its report, “The Fifth Carbon Budget”, which we in the UK have now adopted. It is incumbent on us to make sure that we respond to what the committee has underlined in that report—the importance of carbon capture and storage.

On that matter, I have been pleased to see that the clean growth strategy not only mentions but more than mentions what will happen with carbon capture and storage. Just a little while ago, the Minister told us in the House that the clean growth plan would be on its way shortly, with further bells and whistles. I would like to think that that mention—all three pages of it—may be a bell or whistle that she personally inserted into the clean growth plan to get a new view abroad of what we can get from carbon capture and storage, how important it is for the future and what the next pathways are.

I cannot be wholly uncritical, because certain things need to be underlined at this stage. Opening an avenue on carbon capture and storage will inevitably be seen by many people concerned about the area as springing from something that hon. Members have also mentioned this afternoon—the shameful passage in our recent history of the cancellation of the two carbon capture and storage pilot projects at the very last moment, in 2015. The cancellation of those projects was not just a tragedy and a disaster for the communities involved in them; it spread a pall of doubt and concern across the whole of the industry about whether carbon capture and storage has a future, whether it is worth investing in and whether confidence can be restored to make it go forward, as we all want. We have to tread a path back to the starting line, and I hope that, given the intentions about carbon capture and storage set out in the clean growth strategy, the Government understand what that setback has done to us and find a way to get back to the starting line. There are a lot of measures in those three pages, which suggests that that can be achieved.

I am not sure whether the £100 million—or, to be precise, up to £100 million—that has been set aside for the next phase of the development of carbon capture and storage will be remotely sufficient to get us where we want to go. I hope that, in 2018, when the Government come forward with more plans and details about how the £100 million will be spent and what will happen to it—the clean growth plan assures us that they will do that—the next stage of the road map will set out what we will put in over the next period to make carbon capture and storage work properly and ensure we reach the carbon reduction goals set out in the fifth carbon budget.

In that context, we ought to pay more attention to the excellent report on carbon capture, usage and storage by the Oxburgh commission, of which the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) was a member. Although the clean growth strategy says that that advisory group’s advice influenced the Government’s thoughts on carbon capture and storage, the report sets out the investment that is likely to be needed for carbon capture and storage over the next period, and it is substantially more than the £100 million set out in the clean growth plan. It would be helpful for the Government to provide a formal response to that report, which they have not done hitherto, to put on the record which parts of it they think are important, which parts they will try to implement at an earlier stage and which parts they will leave for later. I will leave that thought with the Minister. That would be a very positive thing to do, in the light of what was put forward in the clean growth strategy. We must be clear about the path ahead of us, and we need to learn from the report’s very good insights.

I hope the Minister notes the cross-party agreement in this Chamber about the urgency of the need to develop carbon capture and storage, about the development route we need to take, about the key role that Teesside and the North sea will play in that as well, and about the need to work together to realise the carbon capture and storage goals that are so necessary on our path to carbon reduction.
2.44 pm

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): As always, it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) for securing this excellent debate, to which there have been many thoughtful, detailed and factual contributions. My hon. Friend is a strong proponent both of the technology and of the area he represents. It was wonderful to hear the unanimity of views, in particular from the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), who speaks so passionately on behalf of her constituency; the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), who made a very factual contribution about the importance of this technology; the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), whose predecessor also promoted the technology; and my hon. Friend the Member for Wavenny (Peter Aldous), who, although not from the region, represents a coastal constituency and has a long-standing interest in this issue. As always, he spoke very well on this subject.

I tweaked the tails of the hon. Members for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) slightly. I understand their points, but I sometimes wonder whether we do not have more solar deployment in Scotland because listening to the Scottish National party might lead us to think that the sun never shines north of the border, whereas we all know that it does very frequently. They made a fair point about the criticism that has been levelled at previous decisions, and that criticism has made me determined to find a copper-bottomed means of taking this technology forward. We all accept, and the report is clear, that it should be in our decarbonisation strategy. We all accept, and I think we all accept, that criticism has been made about the technology, but we need to develop it in a way that meets our triple test: it must ensure maximum decarbonisation, offer a clear route to an acceptable cost level, and help us boost the UK’s technology leadership so we grow the number of jobs in that part of the economy and our export potential.

I will try to answer all hon. Members’ questions. As always, some will not get answered, but I am sure my excellent Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), will be assiduous in capturing any that are not answered and making sure that I answer them further down the line.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister talked about fact-based speeches. Does she accept that the costs for the projects I alluded to are good costings and demonstrate good value for money?

Claire Perry: I have not reviewed those particular costings. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am never without my calculator. If there is one thing I want, it is value for money and a clear route to cost-effective deployment. Hopefully, we all want to go down that path.

It was excellent to hear cross-border, cross-party support for this technology. That is the way to boost investor confidence and ensure the clean growth strategy survives the vagaries of the political cycles. These long-term decisions benefit both us and our children and grandchildren.

All parties welcomed the clean growth strategy, and I thank their representatives for that. We are coming at this from a position of strength. We have the best decarbonisation and growth performance of the G7 economies. We are all determined to capture the enormous opportunity from the global pivot to low-carbon economies, and we want to ensure the UK’s productivity benefits from it. The strategy is broad and binding. It sets out clear targets and harnesses the power of innovation, on which we lead the world, to drive down costs and increase the pace of the roll-out of innovation. It also clearly sets out how we intend to meet some of the challenges.

Carbon capture, usage and storage is a vital part of the strategy. It is needed as a long-term strategic option so we can deliver the 2050 target at the least cost. It is crucial that we cut emissions from sectors that are hard to decarbonise. CF Fertilisers has done an excellent job in taking as much carbon as possible out of its industrial processes, but we understand that producing that vital product is carbon-intensive.

Carbon capture, usage and storage also gives us optionality. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun talked about the opportunity to decarbonise hydrogen production, and it is important that we hold that option as we move towards our low-carbon future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland argued so well, capturing and effectively deploying this technology enhances the competitiveness and productivity of industrial regions such as Teesside, Merseyside, Grangemouth and south Wales. I do not want anyone listening to this debate to be in any doubt that, although some areas may be leading in terms of their ability to promote themselves as places to use this technology, that does not rule out other areas. We want it to be deployed effectively in all parts of the UK where there are industrial clusters.

The technology represents an export opportunity for firms such as Shell and Costain and new UK technology providers such as Carbon Clean Solution, which was funded by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to develop globally leading new forms of carbon sequestration for industrial processes.

Many companies are involved in the supply chain as well. I have been following with great interest the Eight Rivers plant, because it is UK-developed, completely breakthrough technology. It is funded with UK Government money deployed in Texas because of the package of incentives put around it, but the supply chain to the plant involves venerable companies such as Goodwin in Stoke-on-Trent, which is an amazing leader in high-specification metallurgy, and Heatric in Poole, Dorset. If we can capture such opportunities onshore, we bolster our onshore supply chain and, as the IEA has estimated, the global CCUS market could be substantial.

The problem, however, is this: we all accept that CCUS is important—we had some conversation on the nervousness in Norway about doing this—but while 21 CCS plants are operating at scale in the world, 16 are dependent on the revenues from enhanced oil recovery, which suggests that for only five plants on the planet has someone been able to persuade a Government or local player to subsidise the technology substantially, despite the potential of such technology. That tells me that the cost of the existing technology is too high and that there are potentially ways to deploy it more effectively.
That is why I want to change things—this is the point made by the hon. Member for Southport, Test (Dr Whitehead)—and it is very much a personal commitment and something I strongly believe is exceptionally important. That is why we have put in place a much broader strategy on CCS. We want the prize of global leadership in the area: we want to be the people who break the deadlock, deploy CCS in the UK and capture the export opportunities.

We therefore have three areas in which I have set out actions under the clean growth strategy. First, we will constitute the CCUS cost challenge taskforce rapidly, because the model worked extremely well for offshore wind where we all accepted that the existing costs were too high. I take the point about risk sharing—the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun is knowledgeable about this. There is a real question as to how much risk partners were able to accept in that structure. We are keen to probe our understanding of how to get down the cost of the deployment of the technology, so the new taskforce will be constituted in the next month. It will report to me and, as with the green finance taskforce, it will be set specific challenges to come up with ways to reduce the cost.

Secondly, we will publish a deployment pathway for CCUS over the course of the next year, which will include the points made about power capture, industrial capture, and transport and storage. We want specific delivery and investment models for each of them. We will continue to progress the work we are doing with the Teesside Collective, but will also work with other initiatives in Teesside, Merseyside, south Wales and Grangemouth, because there are other opportunities to do so and to learn from.

Alex Cunningham: I very much welcome the commitment to a timeline over the next 12 months. That is extremely welcome, and I wanted to say it specifically, but what else will the Minister do to help build the investor confidence to ensure that we can get the investors to put the money forward to make the projects happen?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman has pre-empted what I was going to come on to, although I am conscious of the time and that I have to leave some for my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland. For example, I too am meeting Statoil today—I am doing the rounds and going straight from this debate.

I am very conscious of the opportunities to work with organisations such as the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative, which for the first time is deploying new funding specifically into this area. We are very keen on substantial private sector investment. We are talking for the first time to the gas turbine blade manufacturers, who have never been involved in the conversation but who clearly depend for their long-term business survival on continuing to generate power with gas.

Internationally, I want to be sure that everyone is aware that we are perceived as a technology leader. We participate in Mission Innovation and its carbon capture innovation challenge. We are already exploring collaborative working relationships with countries such as Norway, which has an excellent Energy Minister. Collectively, between our two countries, we took the hydrocarbons out from under the North sea; surely there is cost-effectiveness in co-operating to put back the CO₂ we have extracted. Given budget constraints, Norway in particular bears some interest, but there is also interest in working together in the United States, Canada and Australia.

We will therefore keep investing in our international CCUS programme and will organise and host an international global carbon capture, usage and storage conference next year to affirm that this is an area in which we want to take international leadership. We want to be the movers and shakers in this field.

As we have made hon. Members aware, we will invest in innovation to support such technology through our £100 million industry and CCUS innovation programme. We will make up to £20 million available for a CCU demonstration programme; we will support the next generation of technology; and in particular, as we talked about, we will support CCUS in some of the further out technologies, especially those to do with the removal of greenhouse gases. To ensure that that all works, I will personally chair a new CCUS council with industry to review progress and priorities.

I want hon. Members to be in no doubt that we are making a fundamental doubling down, as it were, on our commitment, but the guideline is that we must come up with a more cost-effective way of doing CCUS. We have to ensure that we produce the maximum reduction in emissions and we want to position the UK as the global technological leader in this space. That is at the heart of the clean growth strategy.

I will be delighted to attend the APPG and I am happy to have the conversation. As hon. Members should know, my door is always open. I feel that collectively—I choose the word advisedly—we are much better together on this sort of technology. The more we set aside any political differences, the more we ensure that we are perceived as a great place for investors—that would be great.

Sorry, I have one point to finish on quickly. I was asked about the response to the Public Accounts Committee. We accepted a majority of its recommendations, but we did choose to reject that one because, for one thing, it was based on outdated cost analysis. We want to convince everyone—I hope we have done—one of the Government’s commitment to move forward on CCUS. I do not feel that we need to demonstrate its importance because that is already accepted.

I want absolutely and sincerely to say how impressed I am with the work of the Teesside Collective, which has made an exceptionally powerful case to be the first place to move forward with this technology. Discussions are very active, but it would be a bold Minister at my level who set out funding commitments ahead of the publication of the industrial strategy or the Budget. However, the case has been made, and made so well that—forgive my lapse into urban slang—I wonder whether “Teesside Massive” might be more appropriate than Teesside Collective. It is a powerful force, and it is wonderful to see so many colleagues from all parts of the House making the case.
in my short time in this House. I hope that it marks a new era of consensus in our politics.

We have heard about the fierce urgency of “now” when it comes to seizing the moment for CCS. In a powerful speech, the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) set out her long-standing commitment to delivering this technology, rightly alluding to its potential significance after Brexit. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) made a typically thoughtful speech, welcoming the progress that has been made this year and referring in particular to the opportunities for coastal communities—including his own in East Anglia—that form part of the supply chain. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) has made a huge contribution to the pursuit of CCS for Teesside—for our new “massive”, which may take me a while to get used to—in his role as the chair of the APPG, where I am delighted that the Minister will join us in due course.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—I hope I did not just mispronounce his constituency, or at least that I have not endangered the Union in so doing—made a passionate case for the Peterhead site for CCS, and that was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson). I entirely agree that there must be no false starts. This is surely the line in the sand and that form part of the supply chain. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) has made a huge contribution to the pursuit of CCS for Teesside—for our new “massive”, which may take me a while to get used to—in his role as the chair of the APPG, where I am delighted that the Minister will join us in due course.

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The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill)—my mother is also from Hartlepool; she is also a monkey hanger—rightly referenced the key role his town has to play in our green revolution. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), in a very generous tribute to the work of the Teesside Collective, rightly emphasised the benefit of delivering all the viable projects, including those in Scotland. The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) is a hugely informed Opposition spokesman who has done so much on this issue down the years. He rightly praised the Oxburgh review and there is a lot to learn from that.

In closing, I thank the Minister for her personal commitment to making a success of CCS. Her speech was thoughtful and really helpful. It was great to hear about the taskforce and the deployment pathway. We have a great ally in her and I look forward to working with her, and with all colleagues who were here for this debate, as we move forward in the years ahead. I think we are on the cusp of something very special.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered carbon capture and storage.
observed a strict religious law that was against their normal tradition of military readiness. However, they had been ordered by the Spartan political council to lead this vanguard of the Greek city states’ defence, and they put aside what must have been deeply mixed feelings to do the duty that had been assigned to them, for their countrymen and for wider civilisation. The culture of the enlightenment and the forces enlisted throughout history to help defend it have drawn inspiration from these men, who did their duty for the greater good against all odds.

We all remember Nelson’s final message, that “England expects that every man will do his duty”, and his own personal sacrifice for our nation and our allies. Our modern civilisation and modern forces face different challenges and threats, but what does not change is our crack forces’ heroic willingness to go all out, head on and straight at them, to defend each other and what we hold dear. When our modern-day political councils ask what our country should ask of those who are willing to put themselves in harm’s way for us, and how we should help them, we need to remind ourselves of the value of that bond in blood that binds our history and our fighting generations. It is easy for generations whose family memory is distant from the sacrifices our nation made to make the future safe to lose feeling for their importance. However, the modern western civilisation in which we live and into which most nations—even those from outside our tradition—seek to integrate, even while maintaining their own traditions, is founded on a rules-based system that we, as much as any nation, helped to make. We must be prepared to defend it.

Our politics, our freedom and our democracy are worth fighting for, now as always. It is only through preparation, innovation, training and modernisation in our time of relative peace—when the gates are not so hot, as it were—that we will ensure that, should things change, this and successive generations can fight and win.

It is right that in this fast-changing and in many ways increasingly dangerous world we constantly consider how to enhance our capability, capacity and ability to defend the things that we hold dear. The Government recognise that. They have a growing budget for defence and they are committed to the regeneration of our capabilities. They are committed to spending at least 2% of GDP and to grow the defence budget by at least 0.5% above inflation every year. We need to get the most out of that spending and to ensure that our armed forces and other security and support services have the resources, forward thinking and support from our nation that they need to succeed, if at any stage they are called upon. It is right that we, as politicians, in close consultation with our security advisers, military and otherwise, clearly assess our capability requirements in different areas. It is also right that we constantly drive for value with our security advisers, military and otherwise, clearly assess our capability requirements in different areas. It is also right that we constantly drive for value for money in the long term, which includes ensuring that we have a highly productive, agile and innovative defence and security industrial base that is a strategic asset and deterrent in its own right. The political councils of our time must take a long-term view and provide consistent leadership on policy in this area for military and security chiefs to implement.

At this time especially, as we leave the political construct of the European Union, we must lead in showing that our European friends and allies have no more dependable, able and committed a partner in defence and security than the United Kingdom. I believe that the people of the UK instinctively understand that and have the overwhelming will and desire to ensure that it remains the case. The vast majority of people across politics get that when it is expressed in this way. Those who rail at the inefficiency of Brussels and its largesse, inscrutable accounting and questionable politics would nevertheless, without hesitation, defend the values at the heart of homes across Europe. Those of almost all shades of political opinion on how we should improve our compatriots’ lot would agree in a heartbeat that the defence of our shared basic values of liberal democracy and the rule of law should be defended in as modern and effective a way as we can muster. Most people understand that those values provide and preserve the certainty that is fertile ground for prosperity and happiness to flourish, and that protecting and nurturing them is a multigenerational and never-ending endeavour for us all to pursue.

I will leave it to others to catalogue the ways in which our ongoing and upgraded sovereign contribution could help to preserve the rules-based structures that nations of the world enjoy, but let us make no mistake: every child, every family and every individual throughout the land should understand that our willingness to stand up for the civilisation that we hold dear is part of what makes us the people we are, and temporary strictures should not be allowed to detract from that. We are proud of our forces and of the people who serve in them, and we want them to be proud, too. We want them to serve, safe in the knowledge that they and their loved ones will be looked after. If we need to spend more to ensure that they know that, then that is what we must do.

We should not underestimate the economic value to our communities of defence spending. That value comes not just in pounds, shillings and pence, or in the form of the 10,000-plus jobs that support families across my constituency, for example. No—the ethos of service, and respect for it, has its own much wider value in society. If we want public servants who are committed and dedicated to often unseen work, they need to know that, even when they are not thanked, we are thankful. If we want people to look out for each other, it helps to think about what we would do to help each other in extremis.

Everyone in our nation has been touched by stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things in recent moments of need, in Manchester, London, Paris, Brussels and Nice. Our defence personnel, our security services, our police forces and all the other public servants and civilians who leap into action daily inspire us. They, too, are ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Let us think about how we inspire those who make that their life’s work. Let us ensure that we have the most excellent personnel to operate our state-of-the-art new equipment. Let us ensure that they have good pensions and homes. Let us ensure that they are incentivised to give their all.

Colleagues will, I hope, speak about how we used to spend more on defence. I will highlight two aspects of that as food for thought. In the early part of the cold war, we spent 6% of GDP on defence. I do not necessarily advocate spending quite as much as that, and obviously
circumstances are different. However, it may be worth noting, at least for theory’s sake, that if the UK were to make up the other EU nations’ deficit of spending against their NATO target of 2% of GDP, we might do that by spending 5.5% to 6% of our GDP.

Some extraordinary new strategic assets are coming into our forces, not least the two Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers and their complements of aircraft, which it would absolutely be in our allies’ interests for us to be able to deploy, concurrently, in the European sphere and elsewhere. We should maximise the sovereign usefulness of those assets by making sure we can operate them in battle groups on our own if need be. Our naval programme should be geared towards that, and our defence spending and training of skilled personnel should be upgraded substantially to deliver it.

My community in south Somerset is particularly proud of the contribution that it makes and can make in future through the Fleet Air Arm at Yeovilton and the helicopter manufacturing and wider defence industry supply chain. I strongly believe that the armed forces component of our national security must have a 360-degree ability to deal with all requirements. For me, amphibious capability is an essential part of that. I strongly support the modernisation of our Army and want it to have sufficient trained personnel to be scalable and capable of sustained use, with properly equipped medium-weight strike brigades that can make an essential contribution to allies and that are a strategic deterrent in themselves.

I am conscious that the tempo of operations and lack of proper equipment, at least in the early part of operations in recent middle eastern engagements, put significant pressure on the Army and its families, and that must not happen again.

Helicopters were one thing our forces lacked, and I am proud of the way that my Yeovil community has helped to give our forces proper battle-space protection and mobility with its Wildcat and Merlin programmes. In particular, I note Wildcat’s agility and flexibility in close support operations, versatility over land and sea, and flexible and powerful inter-operation with other key systems in both the naval and army spheres. Although there may be other systems that one might want to add for specific purposes, I believe it would be immensely short-sighted not to upgrade and extend our indigenous helicopter platform capabilities, and indeed support, as the Ministry of Defence is, the development of the next generations of battle-space mobility and protection products.

**Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op):** I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way on that point. Does he agree that it would be great to see a defence industrial strategy that really set out a vision for the way in which we procure stuff from the MOD, particularly to support the British steel industry, which is close to my heart, so that we do not see a repeat of the procurement process for the Type 26 frigate, which saw just 35% of the steel in each ship coming from British steel?

**Mr Fysh:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She makes an excellent point. I will come on to industrial strategy in a moment.

I will be working as hard as I can with industry partners to raise the tempo of productivity and innovation to match the commitment from the Ministry of Defence. Defence should be a fundamental part of our industrial strategy for both military and economic reasons, and I stand ready to work with Ministers and their Departments to ensure that we get this right and that proper account is taken of these matters during the defence and security review.

So what are the arguments against spending more? There are those who say we do not have the money. I wish a strong signal to go to the Treasury and Cabinet Office from this debate that it is a false economy not to give defence what it needs to regenerate a full 360-degree capability at this time. We could certainly use a few billion pounds a year currently given in international development, with overwhelming popular support and much greater domestic economic impact.

I have made other multibillion pound suggestions for savings to the Chancellor for his upcoming Budget, which I look forward to discussing with him again. To those who say we have other priorities, I say that this Government more than any other have focused spending on defence and on regeneration of our capabilities, and that this success needs to be reinforced. Economic value added to our communities and inspiration to our people and our allies should be top priorities for us at this time.

To those who say we do not have the will, I have never underestimated the ingenuity, good humour and grit of the British people. We should not hide our light under a bushel. I believe most of our fellow citizens would be proud to see it shine as a beacon for all to rally around.

I will conclude now because I want to allow time for others to speak. We all have a duty to do what we can to keep ambitions for our civilisation open to the next generations. There are some things worth fighting for, and we need excellence in the fight for them in all aspects of what we do every day. We have a duty to honour those who have gone before us. Giving our defence what it needs now is part of defending what they held dear.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** The House might like to know that the winding-up speeches will start at 4 o’clock. Only four Members have written to say they wish to speak. I shall take those Members first and then get in as many others as I can.

3.16 pm

**Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) on securing this debate via the Backbench Business Committee, and I was pleased to be able to support it. It is incumbent on all Members to thank our armed forces for their contribution. They do a heroic job all year round keeping us safe and defending our citizens and allies. As the son of a submariner I know from experience how important the armed forces are, not only for my family who relied on the money brought in to help us when I was growing up but for Plymouth, which is the area to which I will restrict my remarks on the upcoming defence review.

Members will know that since the election in June I have mainly spoken in this Chamber about the paucity of the shipbuilding strategy, the offshoring of our Royal Fleet Auxiliary builds, which should have been done in UK shipyards, and the lack of detail on our Type 31 armaments. My concern is that we will have a lightly armed fishing patrol vessel rather than a fully capable frigate.
I am concerned about the loss of HMS Ocean, particularly its helicopter-carrier capability in littoral waters close to the coast. Then there is the issue of wages and veterans and the need to invest more in our frigates and escort carrier fleet. There was a lot of support for that and I am grateful to Members of all parties who encouraged me to continue speaking on these matters.

My concern about the upcoming review is about the potential for hollowing out capabilities, particularly around the Royal Navy and Royal Marines. Devonport in my constituency is home not only to half our frigate fleet, but to the deep maintenance facility for frigates, submarines and our amphibious assault ships. We already know that HMS Ocean is due to be scrapped, creating a capability gap in helicopter-carrier capacity in littoral waters, but the rumours and speculation that HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion, two world-class capable amphibious assault ships, also face the axe is deeply concerning to those people who have an interest in not only Devonport and Plymouth, but in our national security, which is where I want to focus for a moment.

Having assured access capabilities and the ability to project force and deter our enemies via amphibious assault ships is absolutely a key component of our Royal Navy's full spectrum capability. As we have the precedent of HMS Ocean, one of our three amphibious assault ships, being cut, I am concerned that we could further erode or scrap altogether our amphibious capabilities. Tying up either Albion or Bulwark alongside Devonport has reduced our capability in that respect, which is deeply concerning.

Once the amphibious capabilities have been removed, there is a logical step forward threat to the Royal Marines. I note from recent speculation in the media that up to 1,000 Royal Marines also potentially face the axe. We need to be really clear that the amphibious capabilities provided by the Royal Navy and the specialist forces in the Royal Marines are absolutely essential.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood):** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He talks in great detail about what is going on in Plymouth, but I should make it clear, in case other hon. Members pick up on speculation about what may or may not be happening in the review, which I hope to elaborate on, that no decisions have been made at all. I know hon. Members will want to get things off their chest and share their concerns, but no decisions have been made about any of the ships the hon. Gentleman has mentioned so far. Any decisions to be made are quite some distance off.

**Luke Pollard:** I invite the Minister to take this opportunity to rule out cuts to our amphibious forces in that respect, because—

**Mr Ellwood:** No decisions have been made.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Order.

**Luke Pollard:** I think it is entirely possible for Ministers to set a strategy and direction in which the country will preserve its amphibious assault capabilities. The forthcoming defence capability review should be able to match that, to be honest.
the media recently. It is important to base the debate on capabilities, and I have clearly done that in my remarks. As we approach the latest round of defence cuts—

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): If it would be of use to him, the hon. Gentleman might apply to the Ministry of Defence for a useful fact sheet that it has provided to me. It clearly states that as of 2016 our defence budget was £34.3 billion, but that by 2020 and 2021 it will be £39.7 billion. How is that a cut?

Luke Pollard: I invite the hon. Gentleman to visit Plymouth, where I can show him Stonehouse barracks and the Royal Citadel, which are shortly to be closed, and HMS Ocean, which is shortly to be scrapped. The key point that I was making in my remarks, which I shall happily repeat so that it will not be missed, was about the capabilities of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines. It is in the matter of capabilities that we need to preserve our world-class excellence. I am grateful and thankful to the people who serve in our armed forces; I know many such people, and members of my family have served in that area as well, so I am cautious about how I talk about the issue.

I have asked, both in Plymouth and nationally, for cross-party working to make a robust case to the Government opposing cuts to our amphibious assault ships in the future. [Interjection.] I know there has been some laughing about this but, after the interventions that I have taken during my speech, I do not expect, in a few months’ time, the Ministry of Defence, the Government or the Royal Navy to announce any loss of our amphibious assault ships. I implore the Minister to cement and confirm that HMS Bulwark and the Royal Marines make to the United Kingdom’s amphibious assault capabilities, and protect them in the capability review that is coming up. I should be grateful if the Minister would address the concerns that I have raised about the Type 31 frigate, in particular.

3.26 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) on securing this important and timely debate and I echo the comments that he made about my right hon. Friend the Minister, whose recent actions in trying to save the life of an injured police officer are an example and inspiration to us all.

I welcome a review of Britain’s defence capability. There is, after all, much to review. We should review whether we are really meeting our 2% of GDP NATO spending commitment. We should review the woeful situation that means that we cannot commit to enduring brigade-size multi-theatre operational deployments. We should review what the future of defence capability and procurement will look like if we do not continue to support and encourage the expertise and world-leading skills that we have in our country and our industry. We absolutely must address the shortfall in the current defence equipment budget. I understand that that is about £10 billion over 10 years or so. I agree with other hon. Members that we must significantly increase defence spending, for several reasons: first, the defence of the realm and the protection of our people is the first duty of any Government; secondly, we must do it for vital strategic reasons; and, finally, the armed forces are the jewel in the crown of the country, and the best of Britain. Defence spending increases our industrial capability and the ability to defend ourselves, but it is also a fantastic vehicle for social mobility and advancement for people of all backgrounds.

A few weeks ago, I visited the Kurdistan region of Iraq. I was immensely proud to meet elements of 2nd Battalion the Mercian Regiment, who are there training peshmerga forces. That is one of the many contributions that we are making in the fight against Daesh, and it is a clear demonstration of our armed forces’ global reach. Needless to say, ours is not a peaceful world: we can see threats from an emboldened Russia, a belligerent North Korea, and the remnants of the Daesh death cult. There is also always the possibility of unforeseen threats. History demonstrates that we rarely see where the next conflict will come from. It is therefore unwise, at the very moment when we are launching ourselves back into the world as an independent, free and sovereign nation, to penny-pinch on our national defence expenditure.

The 2% NATO obligation, which I am pleased to see the Americans are urging all our NATO allies to take extremely seriously, was a welcome commitment from the previous Prime Minister. However, it may inadvertently have given our forces false hope. It is now clear that we achieve 2% only by a recent change in how we measure, and what we include in, our defence expenditure. The inclusion of forces pensions and efficiency savings diminishes the value of the 2% in terms of real defence capability. I hope sincerely that the review will address those matters and lead to a realistic increase in defence expenditure. However, regardless of how much is spent on defence in future—and we must spend more—the result must be forces that are truly capable, with the ability to project both hard and soft power globally.

Currently our armed forces cannot deploy at brigade level to two major operational theatres simultaneously and enduringly. That means that we could not today undertake Iraq and Afghanistan-type operations simultaneously. That is a massive reduction in our global power, our status and our military capability and credibility. We must be able to deploy in more than one operational theatre simultaneously and enduringly at brigade level if we are to be—or remain—a nation of some worth. We need the ability to project the full spectrum of our capabilities on land, sea and air without having to be part of an international coalition, as we did successfully in Sierra Leone and the Falklands.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is not just about the deployment of two brigade groups but about the follow-on forces: those that come six months later, and six months after that. We have to have sustenance. Sustainment is what guarantees us a decent result.

Jack Lopresti: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent intervention. I was careful to use the word “enduringly”. We could possibly throw 10,000 troops around the world to do a short operation simultaneously, but the important point is about doing so over a reasonable period of time and enduringly.

As long as we have a funding settlement that forces commanders to choose between equipment and recruitment, the armed forces will remain severely restricted and hampered in their capabilities. I suggest that the restraint
on our current defence capability must be reviewed as a matter of great urgency. Such discussions normally lead to the question of equipment and its provision. Better, more realistic funding will help buy more equipment in the mid-term, but we must think in strategic terms. If the review does not lead to increased investment but further limits the spending power and capability of our forces, we may soon discover that it will be more difficult for our country to remain a world-renowned centre of defence and aerospace excellence and expertise, never mind having the ability to defend our people here and abroad.

I have the interest and great pride of representing a constituency that has a very large number of successful and highly skilled defence and aerospace companies, the largest among them being Rolls-Royce, Airbus and GKN. As an example, Rolls-Royce represents 2% of all UK exports by value. We must build on and increase that. Filton and Bradley Stoke is also home to Defence Equipment and Support at MOD Abbey Wood, which employs about 10,000 people and does a fantastic job in procurement and equipping our armed forces across the world.

The most obvious example of the threat to our sovereign defence industrial capacity is the recent announcements from BAe. From conversations I had with representatives of Rolls-Royce in my constituency just a couple of days ago, I know it is concerned in the wake of those announcements. The RAF Typhoon jets have a predicted service life of until about 2040. That may sound like plenty of time, but the delivery of the next-generation fighter could take two decades from start to finish. Also, without such defence contracts, as well as clarity on what the Government’s plans are and sufficient funding, companies such as Rolls-Royce are in danger of losing skilled personnel capable of delivering such contracts. In recent conversations the company was unequivocal in its fear that once the capability and skills are lost, in many cases they are lost for good.

I am pleased that recent responses from the Ministry of Defence have confirmed that it understands how important the review is to British industry and our sovereign capacity to equip our armed forces properly. I would therefore like to ask the Minister when progress will be made on committing to the next-generation fighter. That is vital to safeguard the expertise we need and the capacity and capability we require for future generations.

The review comes at a crucial time. If done properly, and acted on, it will reinforce and strengthen our sovereign defence capability at a time when we are reasserting ourselves on the world stage. Crucially, in the end, wars are not won, and nations are not defended, by equipment alone; we need people. The Army has a severe manpower shortage, the Royal Navy is fearful of being unable to man our aircraft carriers and the Royal Marines are very concerned about potential cuts to our amphibious capabilities.

I call on the Minister to show real courage and leadership. A failure to increase resources would see Britain losing both its technical expertise and international credibility. In short, it would serve to entrench a dire situation and diminish our place in the world—and, crucially, our ability to defend our people.

3.34 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) for bringing forward this important issue for discussion.

I welcome the review of defence capability and hope that it will address some of the serious shortcomings of the current strategic defence and security review, which was published only a few years ago. As we know, the 2015 SDSR does not take into account issues regarding Brexit in any shape or form and it therefore requires urgent revision in the current climate.

We have often said that the SDSR is hugely ambitious. However, in recent years the Government have failed to manage the defence budget effectively and get best value for the taxpayer. There are gaping holes in the existing budgets. There is an £8.5 billion black hole in the defence estate strategy budget and a £4 billion hole in the defence equipment plan. As many in the Chamber know, the National Audit Office warned at the beginning of the year:

“The risks to the affordability of the Ministry of Defence Equipment Plan are greater than at any point since reporting began”.

The National Audit Office also noted the lack of room for unplanned cost growth in the equipment budget and the vulnerability to changes in foreign exchange rates, which are significant, with £18.6 billion for equipment that has to be paid in US dollars. The Prime Minister’s own former security chief, Mark Lyall Grant, has warned of a stark impact on UK national security and the military’s spending plans in the event of a Brexit downturn in the coming years.

As many Members will know, in Scotland, the Tories have slashed 20% off our defence estate, and Army personnel numbers are at an historic low. What is more, in Scotland we still have no conventional ocean-going vessels in our waters, and we have had no maritime patrol aircraft since the scrapping of the entire Nimrod fleet.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for taking an intervention. Will he acknowledge the significant investment in my constituency at RAF Lossiemouth, with the P-8 Poseidon aircraft, which is replacing the maritime aircraft scrapped in 2015? That is a huge investment by the UK Government in a Scottish airbase that will make Lossiemouth one of only three fast jet airbases in the whole of the United Kingdom.

Douglas Chapman: Again, that is part of an ongoing campaign by the previous Member for the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, who highlighted on so many occasions the loss of the maritime aircraft capability.

Douglas Ross: Will you welcome that investment?

Douglas Chapman: Of course, we welcome that, just as we welcome the contribution of other countries in the northern Atlantic. I believe Norway has also taken on a number of P-8s. It is important that we have that level of cover. Other Members have mentioned capability, and the critical issue is how we spend our budget, so as not to keep ramping up a misspent budget.

We are now in the absurd situation in Scotland that we do not have a single maritime patrol aircraft, and neither do we have any ocean-going surface vessels to
defend our own waters. Let us not forget the ludicrous scenario in February 2014, when *The Scotsman* reported that the MOD had had to use Twitter to gather information about a Russian warship moored in Scottish waters over the Christmas period of 2013. That was not only a national embarrassment; it reflects the utter inadequacy of the UK’s defence capabilities.

As a member of the all-party parliamentary group for the polar regions, I have a particular interest in the Arctic and high north. The Defence Committee published a report in 2015 called “Flexible response? An SDSR checklist of potential threats and vulnerabilities”, which identified Russian aggression in Europe and the high north as one of the potential threats facing the UK. In evidence given to the Committee in 2015, Tim Reilly, founder of the Arctic Advisory Group, highlighted the importance of a UK presence in the Arctic and high north, yet the UK has gone AWOL in the region. That is not good enough for Scotland and for the UK. It should be a bread-and-butter activity and military priority to defend our own shores and coastlines.

The cuts in defence—some Members have said that there are no cuts—have been made to fund the Tory obsession with Trident. In 2010, the national security strategy downgraded the threat of nuclear weapons conflict, yet the SDSR failed to downgrade the role of nuclear weapons and military capability in that area. It is high time the Government prioritised conventional defence capabilities instead of weapons of mass destruction, which I think we all pray will never be used. We issue the reminder again that Trident skews every single part of the defence budget, across three services, and that the project should be abandoned.

Almost all the promises made to Scotland on defence during the independence referendum have been broken. It is clear to us that the Government cannot be entrusted with the defence of the UK or Scotland. Only this week, we heard that the Type 31 ships, promised in 2014 to workers on the Clyde, may now be built on Merseyside. For those workers, their trust in the Government lies at zero. I urge the Government to commit to publish the checklist of potential threats and vulnerabilities, which takes account of the repercussions of Brexit for today and beyond.

3.40 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Yeo (Mr Fysh) for securing this important debate. I must start by saying that my constituency will be at the heart of any discussion of defence capability. Aldershot, the home of the British Army and with a significant garrison, welcomes some of the specialised infantry battalions that will be formed in response to the SDSR 2015. In Farnborough, the birthplace of British aviation, we have a significant number of world-leading defence industry companies, which export their world-class manufactured goods around the globe.

In the brief time that I have, I will express two things. First, I hope that this review will be about more than just kit and equipment. When we consider responding to the threats this country faces around the world, our attitude should be one of energetic and ambitious global engagement. I saw a good example of that last weekend—I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—when I travelled to Bahrain with several other hon. Members to see work being done on the new Royal Naval base, HMS Jaffir. It is a remarkable facility, which will accommodate the four mine countermeasure vessels that are already out there, and will allow our aircraft carrier to be serviced via tender. It is a phenomenal capability multiplier and a tangible commitment to the security of an important ally. That is the kind of model we should apply elsewhere—not just in the Gulf, but around the world.

It is an attitudinal thing. We must ask the question: “If we do not have the resources to facilitate that commitment in the Gulf states and beyond, should we perhaps invest in them?” It will be money well spent.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point about an attitude, with which I entirely agree. Under this Government, we are seeing for the first time an increase in the defence budget by 0.5% each year. We have a growing defence budget, a new naval base east of Suez again, Type 31s giving us the opportunity to increase platform numbers on the fleet, and new aircraft carriers. Under this Government we see an increasing defence budget and increasing defence capability.

Leo Docherty: Absolutely; I am very grateful for that intervention. What is impressive, when travelling to the Gulf—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Gentleman faces more toward the Chair, the Minister will hear better and the microphone will work better for the recording.

Leo Docherty: I will gladly afford the Minister the opportunity to listen. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). When travelling in the Gulf, as the Minister and others will know, it is reassuring that they recognise the tangible commitment to our collective security. There is a return on the investment that is more than the value of the vessel itself. I hope that that attitude, and our requirement to invest in that attitude, will be recognised in the review, because it could apply elsewhere, such as Libya or Iraq. If that recognition is to be meaningful, however, it must be joined up with our foreign policy. For example, there is no point in our having military engagement with Iraq while simultaneously closing our consulate in Basra. We should be energetic and ambitious, but that must be part of the whole package, alongside our foreign policy.

My second point is that I hope the review will recognise the strategic importance of our defence industries in enhancing our global position. I have talked about the naval base, but I want also to mention the export of Typhoon to our allies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. That has not been without controversy, but having travelled to Riyadh to visit the targeting centre, where targets in Yemen are assessed and allocated, I was most impressed to see NATO doctrine in use and a large number of British-trained members of the Saudi royal air force and army. Because we are involved, and not another supplier such as China or Russia, they have the benefit of our doctrine of responsible use. We do not only sell them aircraft, but we export a doctrine of responsible use. I know that the Saudis are grateful for that, and it is a tremendous strategic benefit to us.
Bob Stewart: I was with my hon. Friend when he visited. I point out to the House that the Saudi pilots we spoke to would often abort their mission immediately if they felt there was any danger of so-called—I hate this phrase—collateral damage; in other words, civilians being killed. That was good to hear.

Leo Docherty: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We should have the confidence to double down on those relationships. BAE Systems successfully supplied the Typhoon to our allies in Saudi Arabia, and it has been very effective operationally. We heard recently that BAE Systems has signed a memorandum of understanding with the state of Qatar for 24 Typhoon aircraft. I hope that more exports can be achieved throughout the region. It is the right thing to do not only commercially, but strategically and morally.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): We have now heard from all those hon. Members who notified me of their wish to speak. It may help new and less experienced hon. Members—I know that some are less experienced—to know that the same rules apply in Westminster Hall as in the Chamber: you should notify the Chair if you wish to speak.

3.47 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) on securing the debate. I will concentrate on the particular aspect of defence and industrial capacity relating to his constituency: helicopters.

The right hon. Gentleman is right. The Wildcat programme is of great advantage, and it is of considerable concern to the industry that its future is now in question as a result of the opening in a very open-ended way of the procurement programme by the Government.

I want to leave the Minister with one question. Can he say quite explicitly that the helicopter sector is an important part of the industrial strategy? If he can give that statement and commitment, that is rather important. This is the only part of the whole aerospace sector where there is a completely integrated system, from R and D upstream, down to manufacture in the UK. If that is lost, an industry that is crucial to defence and to the economy is lost.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I agree with much of what the right hon. Gentleman says about past Governments’ actions. In the light of that, does he agree that it would be odd to decide to scrap the Wildcat, of which we have about 60 and which is an exportable helicopter with a high degree of flexibility, in order to keep the Pumas, which are not made in the UK, are not exportable and are old, about to retire and less flexible and capable?

Sir Vince Cable: The right hon. Gentleman is right. The Wildcat programme is of great advantage, and it is of considerable concern to the industry that its future is now in question as a result of the opening in a very open-ended way of the procurement programme by the Government.

I want to leave the Minister with one question. Can he say quite explicitly that the helicopter sector is an important part of the industrial strategy? If he can give that statement and commitment, that is rather important. This is the only part of the whole aerospace sector where there is a completely integrated system, from R and D upstream, down to manufacture in the UK. If that is lost, an industry that is crucial to defence and to the economy is lost.

3.51 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As time is so pressing, and so many people wish to speak who do not get as many opportunities as I do to speak on this subject, I shall just raise a few brief points.

First, I wish to place on record the gratitude of the Defence Committee as a whole to my hon. Friends the Members for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and for North Wiltshire (James Gray) and the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who served on the Committee in the last Parliament, for everything they did to buttress the strength and depth of our inquiries and conclusions. We are very grateful to them all.

I would like to raise the following questions. What is this review about? Who should be able to scrutinise the process? What should we be spending on defence? What is our concept for defence? Is our decision-making process adequate to produce a strategy? Is our soft power adequately resourced? The answers necessarily will be inadequate.

The answer to the first question—what is this review about?—is: I do not know. It is about either increasing the money, sorely needed for defence, or further cutting capability in order to balance the books. I know which of them I should like it to be, and I know which I fear it will be.

Who should be able to scrutinise the process? This process is being carried out by the National Security Adviser, Mark Sedwill. The Defence Committee has applied to have Mr Sedwill appear before us, but the initial response has not been encouraging. It is being suggested that the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy would be the appropriate body for the National Security Adviser to appear before, notwithstanding
the fact that National Security Advisers have appeared before us previously. I hope wiser counsels will prevail there.

What should we be spending on defence? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) for not only initiating the debate, but making the point very well about what percentage of GDP we used to spend on defence. We used to spend the same on defence as we spent on education and health in the 1980s. Now we spend two and a half times on education and nearly four times on health what we spend on defence. Although we are spending more on defence, defence has indisputably fallen down our national scale of priorities.

What is our concept for defence? That was ably set out by the Labour-led strategic defence review of 1997-98, which came to the conclusion—at a time when we were not facing a threat on the continent of Europe—that we needed an amphibious taskforce and a carrier strike taskforce in order to form a sea base that could go anywhere in the world. I hope to reassure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) by quoting to him from what the Minister for Defence Procurement wrote in a letter deposited in the House of Commons Library in January, after I raised the question of the future of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark on the Floor of the House. She said:

“There are no current plans to decommission the ships early, and I can reassure you that their out of service dates are 2033 and 2034 respectively.”

It would be diabolical to take ships with that amount of life left in them and retire them early.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I absolutely agree with what my right hon. Friend said, not least because he is my boss on the Defence Committee. To take Albion and Bulwark out of service would be an absolute false economy, and I very much hope that the Minister will convey that back to the Department.

Dr Lewis: The idea that anyone could be my right hon. Friend’s boss on the Defence Committee is polite, but fanciful.

Is our decision-making process adequate to produce a strategy? In a word, no. We have got to a situation where the chiefs of staff are too divorced from strategy-making. They are then left to have to make cuts in capacity themselves, while they are not able to get together to thrash out a joint strategy in the way that the Chiefs of Staff Committee traditionally did.

Finally, is our soft power adequately resourced? It could be, but the signs are not promising. For example, we produced a report entitled, “Open Source Stupidity”—I think that is probably the first time the word “stupidity” has appeared in an official Select Committee report title—referring to the fact that, for £25 million a year, we need not close the BBC Monitoring centre at Caversham. It is not too late to reverse that extremely stupid decision; and I am glad that the Foreign Secretary, the Chairmen of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Development Committee and I will have the opportunity to visit that excellent establishment soon, in the hope that we can, even now, prevent that folly from proceeding.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. A number of Back Benchers are still trying to catch my eye. While I cannot extend the debate, I will shorten the time for the Front Benchers. The winding-up speeches will now start at 4.6 pm, to give more Back Benchers a chance.

3.57 pm

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) for securing the debate.

I will constrain my remarks to a specific element of defence policy, which is the recently published national shipbuilding strategy, in the context of previous policy with regard to the shipbuilding strategy in the United Kingdom and, in particular, the terms of business agreement signed between the Ministry of Defence and what was then known as BVT in 2009 and subsequently known as BAE Systems Surface Ships Ltd. I would appreciate it if the Minister made specific reference to how that terms of business agreement has been formulated into the current national shipbuilding strategy.

I was alarmed to read that document and learn of key omissions that have not been carried over from the TOBA to the national shipbuilding strategy—most notably, the definition of any key industrial capability with regard to the shipbuilding industry. The key industrial capability for shipbuilding is defined as being to “design, build and integrate...a complex warship of up to 5,000 tonnes deep displacement at an interval of 1 shipbuild every 12 months and a design interval of every 6 years” and to “contribute to the sustainment of sovereign capability” through the provision and maintenance of facilities and key post workers in the shipbuilding sector.

I was alarmed to learn that the Type 31 frigates should be competitively tendered, which essentially breaks clause 39 of the TOBA between the Ministry of Defence and BAE Systems because it jeopardises that long-term commitment of work. It also makes no reference to the achievement of upper quartile performance in the national shipbuilding industry. That upper quartile performance was defined as a benchmarking exercise that would determine the optimal design, build, combat systems integration and through-life support infrastructure in the UK that would be in the upper quartile of all firms engaged in the industry worldwide. I would like to know why those terms and definitions have not been sustained in the current national shipbuilding strategy.

I had the privilege of working in the shipbuilding industry, following in the footsteps of my grandfather and father, and was heavily involved in the development of the benchmarking exercise during my time at BAE Systems. That included development of the design of a shipyard on the Clyde that would deliver exactly what I have referred to: the key industrial capability at an upper quartile performance level. I was rather alarmed to learn that that will no longer be invested in. That means that we will no longer be able to achieve a build interval of one shipbuild every 12 months or a design interval of every six years. That capability has now in effect been surrendered by the Ministry of Defence, as is clear in the current shipbuilding strategy. I would like to know why that has happened and why the business case demonstrating that delivery of that capability was
perfectly financially viable has not been upheld. What long-term financing options have been considered beyond current in-year spend to deliver that long-term build capability? I would be grateful if the Minister elaborated on those issues.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): We have six minutes and three people.

4 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I shall be brief, Mr Bone.

This is like wandering into a group of the last of the big spenders. I do not share the view of most of my colleagues that we should be spending more on defence. Moreover, I am always very suspicious of Members of Parliament who come and represent their constituency interests in these sorts of lobbying exercises. Therefore, I was loth to contribute to a debate that is about, from my point of view, the question of helicopters, which the leader of the Liberal Democrats raised, but I have looked into it a bit and I find, to my surprise, that I can reconcile what I want to say both with my views about defence expenditure and with the national interest rather than my constituency interest, which happen, on this rare occasion, to coincide.

I understand that, as part of the review, the Government are, rightly, considering reducing the number of kinds of helicopter that are run by the armed forces as a whole by at least one. I welcome that, because I am perfectly sure that we run too many kinds of helicopter, which is a very expensive way to do things. I understand that the choice may come down to one between the Puma and the Wildcat. As my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) mentioned, the Wildcat is built in his constituency. Many of my constituents work in the Leonardo factories that produce it. It is a relatively modern—in fact, very modern—helicopter. It is highly flexible, small, agile, armed with the latest equipment and highly exportable. It is also highly usable on the new light frigates, which unlike most of the ships of our Navy, which I persist in believing will never be used in the whole of their lives, are likely to be used, because the Navy will use them and may be useful somewhere in the world. They would be a great deal more use if they had helicopters on them, and those helicopters are ideally suited to that. The Army also uses them. They are very new, as I said; they have many years of life ahead of them. We own roughly 60 of them.

The Puma, by contrast, is a much bigger thing, which the Royal Air Force loves. I bear the scars, as I think the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) do, of a previous defence review, in which we found a sort of gang of all the top brass. They appeared, with spaghetti all over them, at the National Security Council, and persuaded us to invest in cats and traps and things on those very large aircraft carriers, and to get rid of the vertical take-off planes that we then had, the Harriers, because the Royal Air Force loves big fast jets. I fear that the Royal Air Force may also love those large helicopters, but they are not built in Britain. They are aged. They will be disappearing quite soon anyway. They do not carry the latest equipment. We cannot put them nearly so easily on ships.

I think it would be a travesty if we ended up getting rid of the 60 modern, light, effective, flexible, British-built, exportable helicopters, for the sake of keeping 22—if I have the number right—ancient, foreign-produced, non-exportable, heavy RAF helicopters. I very much hope that the Ministry of Defence will not make that mistake.

4.3 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I, too, welcome the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh).

I want to put on the record some positive points about defence and defence spending in Scotland. GMB Scotland reported in July 2016 that almost 14,000 people were estimated to be employed at MOD installations in Scotland and that MOD employees support 20,687 jobs and £473 million-worth of wage payments in Scotland alone. That contrasts with some of the more negative points that we heard from the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman). He went on to talk about the Clyde. The Clyde is getting 20 years of work building the eight Type 26 anti-submarine frigates. That is what this Government are investing in Scotland. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the Type 31 contracts. Scottish yards will be able to apply to build those frigates like any other yards across the United Kingdom, so it is important to put that on the record.

I again welcome the investment in my constituency: I also did so in my intervention. RAF Lossiemouth will be a key focal point for the UK’s defences with the arrival of the P-8 Poseidon aircraft. That will bring 400 new jobs and will involve £3 billion of investment over the next 10 years. That is crucially important to my constituency and very welcome.

The UK has one of the biggest defence budgets anywhere in the world. Scotland benefits from that, and I am sure that under this review it will continue to benefit.

4.5 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I shall be brief, Mr Bone. There is a realism that we need to bring to this debate, and one of the issues that we have to think about is what sort of country we want to be, what sort of role we want to play in the world, and the strategic situation that we face; and the only thing that is changing is the strategic situation that we face, which is getting worse. The Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre puts state-on-state warfare as a major threat; it is slight now, but growing and will be becoming severe in the next 20 or 30 years. That is the context in which this debate should be seen. We keep hearing, peppered throughout the debate, the noises from colleagues who are complaining that capability is being cut on an arbitrary basis because there is not enough money in the budget. These are not strategic decisions; they are decisions taken to match a year-on-year target, so the impression being given is that the defence budget is really being planned only one year ahead, with the consequences of these cuts.

Let us look back over the last seven years. The coalition Government inherited a black hole in the defence budget of £35 billion. Coupled with George Osborne’s 8% defence cash cut to the headline figure, that meant that we reached 2015 already having suffered a real-terms cut of 17% in the defence budget, regardless of the ongoing pressure of defence cost inflation. Recently, we
have suffered the collapse in the value of the pound against the dollar, as has been said; and looking five and 10 years ahead, we are facing another black hole in the defence budget, which will have severe consequences, because the big equipment programmes that tend to dominate defence expenditure are crowding out investment in technology and people. Always it is manpower that takes the cut to protect the big equipment programmes.

We need to concentrate not just on how we are to strategically improve the defence budget to protect the existing programmes. If we are to have such a limited defence budget, we need to learn how to spend more on people, technology and industrial capacity, to be able to build the equipment that we need for the campaign that we are in, rather than finding ourselves with the equipment that we ordered 10 years ago, which is inappropriate for the campaign that we now face. We need to invest more in the people, who are, in the end, the absolute force multiplier in any crisis that we face. It is a big challenge, but if we continue on the present trajectory, the situation will just get worse.

4.8 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am not a religious man, but it is proof that God is smiling on us when you are in the Chair, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) on securing the debate and giving a very thoughtful speech at the start.

Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to members of the armed forces, the first responders to the events that happened here and across Europe earlier this year, and of course to the Minister. He knows that although we have disagreements, I have great respect for him. I am a fan of his. I think he is a thoughtful Minister and I look forward to his summing up the debate.

The review is welcome. It is of course necessary. However, as has been mentioned, we hope that it leads to a new SDSR, because the previous SDSR, which other hon. Members have mentioned, does not take account of the currency fluctuations and does not take account of Brexit. We need a proper review of our strategic assets.

The Government need to be a bit more transparent on this. I was concerned to hear what the Chairman of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), adumbrated earlier on the lack of engagement from those involved in the review. It would be good if the Minister secured that for the Defence Committee when he leaves the debate today.

The big thing that we need to look at is our own back yard. As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) mentioned, we are AWOL in the High North. It is an area where we are not just letting ourselves down, but letting our allies down as well. It has to be a high strategic priority, and this review and the subsequent SDSR should address that.

The total absence of major surface vessels anywhere in Scottish waters, and the continued reliance on our allies, should alarm every single Member of this House. They are our waters and we have a duty to protect them.

I also want to address the 2% spend on GDP. It is, frankly, the most creative accountancy that I have witnessed in some time, including efficiency savings and pension contributions, as has been mentioned. Let us be clear: the 2% that the Government claim is an example of the books being well and truly cooked.

There are too many glaring and serious problems for one mini review to handle: a black hole in the equipment plan; inadequacy of the defence estate; dilution of the national shipbuilding strategy, as mentioned by my fellow Glaswegian, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney); threats to the Royal Marines; uncertainty over amphibious assets; and the impact of Brexit—the list is alarmingly long. If the review is to be honest, and if it is to be worth the paper it is written on, it will lead to a new SDSR and it should be published before the end of the year. I look forward to hearing what the Minister says in his summing-up speech.

4.11 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

This is an important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) on securing it. It comes at a very appropriate time, as has been mentioned, because the Ministry of Defence, the Cabinet Office, the Treasury and other Government Departments are currently conducting a review of national security capabilities. My first question to the Minister, echoing what others have asked, is about whether he can indicate when that report will be published and what exactly its terms of reference will be. As I understand it, the strategic defence and security review will be, to use the Secretary of State for Defence’s phrase, “refreshed”. Will the Minister confirm that that will dovetail into the review of national security capabilities?

We know that a review is necessary because the Ministry of Defence is facing enormous problems. The SDSR 2015 is built on the premise that there will be sufficient efficiency savings, but as we all know those savings have not been identified. I know that the MOD was hoping for savings in the defence estate, but very little has come from that direction and, of course, there is the depreciation of the pound following the decision on Brexit. In fact, the Royal United Services Institute recently warned that there will be “substantial financial implications” for defence as a result of the weakening pound. In August, RUSI warned that the MOD faces extra costs of up to £700 million a year in the wake of the Brexit vote and the pound’s fall against the dollar. The National Audit Office recently pointed out that there is “little room for unplanned cost growth” and has expressed concern about the current defence equipment plan’s vulnerability to foreign exchange rates.

The problem is that approximately £18.6 billion is going to the United States in dollars. Rather than placing an emphasis on developing our own industrial defence capacity—our sovereign capacity—the Government are buying a whole raft of new equipment from the US for the Navy and the RAF: the F-35s, nine P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircrafts and 50 Apache attack helicopters, all from the United States of America.

Bob Stewart: We buy equipment and weapons from the United States because they are better than the equipment and weapons we can produce here, and those of us here all want our armed forces to have the best. That is the reason we do it: we do not have a choice if we want to help our armed forces.
Wayne David: That highlights the short-term thinking of the present Government. What we really need is an industrial defence strategy that invests in the skills and capabilities of our own indigenous industries, so that when choices have to be made we can choose, quite rightly, to have our own capability enacted and not bought off-the-shelf from abroad.

The Government regularly come out with their platitudes that defence expenditure increases every year, but let me be clear that the MOD faces a financial crisis. We are told by the MOD’s permanent secretary that over the next 10 years the MOD will have, in his words, to seek out and secure £20 billion of efficiency savings. He says that notwithstanding increased budgets, “our ambitious equipment program will not be affordable without” those efficiency savings. I do not believe it is realistic or, indeed, honest to talk about that level of efficiency savings. I note the comments by Sir George Zambellas, the admiral and former head of the Royal Navy, who recently said to the press:

“There is a suggestion that there’s lots more efficiencies to be made. There are not. I’ve been helping deliver efficiencies for my 37 years in the navy. We have reached the bottom of the efficiency barrel and we all know that, because the Navy is so hollowed out. It hasn’t got enough missiles and spares. It’s very short of the integrated support that is needed as a single service.”

Those are damning comments by someone who does not have a political axe to grind, but takes an objective view of the very real crisis that the Navy, in particular, faces.

Indeed, it is clear that the MOD is already involved in planning for a fresh round of deep and crude cuts. As we have all seen, there have been reports in the press that the Royal Marines may be cut by 1,000 from their present 6,500. Earlier this year there was confirmation that Plymouth’s 42 Commando, one of the last specialist Royal Marines fighting units, was withdrawn from frontline service. The amphibious fleet may face decommissioning, with HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark both potentially becoming part of history—I refer Members to the excellent early-day motion 391 in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). I ask the Minister to listen not only to what I am saying, but to what all Members have said this afternoon about how important it is to maintain that amphibious capability, and I urge him to give a commitment today that those two ships will not be considered ripe for cutting.

This is all occurring, as I said, at a time of crisis. The Navy personnel stands at 2% under establishment. There is a particular problem in the Navy with skilled personnel and engineers. The RAF is 5% under strength, and we had the very bad news last week that nearly 2,000 skilled, well-paid jobs will be lost with BAE Systems. It’s very short of the integrated support that is needed as a single service.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the shadow Minister, but I am afraid I cannot let him speak for longer than the Minister will be able to, so I hope he is about to finish.

Wayne David: I am about to wind up. I remind Members that the Conservative manifesto for the 2015 election said that the Army would not fall below 82,000 people. It has: the latest figures show that the Army is down to 76,680, which speaks for itself. There is a very real crisis.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister for an honest statement about the real problems that our armed forces face today. Can we have a commitment that the short-term—
of our industrial base—not just in defence and aerospace, but in a wider context—in the economics of this country. However, we face a fiscal reality and my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) made the situation clear, taking us back in time to the legacy fiscal issues that we have inherited, which are still very real today. My hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil touched on the important wider duty of care that we have to our armed forces. I include the whole family—the partners, the wives, the husbands, the children, the cadets and the reserves. It is important that we look after them not only when they are in uniform, but further afield, when they finally move back into civilian life as our respected veterans.

Before I come on to the national security capability review, which is the core of our discussion, I will respond to a couple of points. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) spoke about the importance of the Type 31e. It is a simple design that is intended to have bespoke changes put on to it. It is designed for export. That is why it seems simplistic compared with the Type 26, the frigates, the destroyers and so on.

I am grateful to the Chair of the Defence Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) who made the future of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark clear. We should not forget the amphibious capabilities in the Bay class, as was illustrated in our response to the recent hurricanes in the Caribbean.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) spoke about our commitment to 2%, which I can confirm. I am pleased that other nations are catching up with us to meet that important commitment. We want that to continue and, as many hon. Members have said, we are increasing our budget by 0.5% above inflation. That is very important to recognise.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) spoke about the importance of our footprint across the world. There is not only HMS Juffair, which I am pleased that hon. Members were able to see; we have a footprint right across the Gulf and in other places, including in a transitional or temporary mode. We are operating in and have exercises in 20 locations from Nigeria to the Balkans, to further afield in Poland with a resurgent Russia, to the Caribbean and not least, to the skies of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) asked important questions about helicopters. If I may, I will ask the Procurement Minister to write to him in more detail.

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) spoke about the number of platforms, and I agree with him. We have more than a dozen different helicopter platforms, if we count them all up, which is too many given all the procurement lines, software upgrades and training packages. That needs to be simplified.

On the national security capability review, we need to step back and remind ourselves that the SDSR 2015 was the blueprint for our security—for meeting terrorism, the growth of terrorism and extremism, state-based aggression and cyber, and responding to those who undermine the rules of international order—but there have been changes. We have had five terrorist attacks in this country, a resurgent Russia, the activities of North Korea and cyber-attacks on our health service, on companies and on Parliament itself. That is why the capability review is required. As I said, there has been much speculation, but the details will come through in the new year. I am sure that Parliament will be involved in the usual manner, including through the Select Committee.

The review will be Cabinet-led and have 12 strands, of which the defence aspect is simply one part. It is important, however, to recognise that any armed forces must adapt to and evolve with the times. We need to understand what the right balance of scale, readiness and reach is, and what our enablers to provide that support are. Where do we place those assets, not only so they are ready to be used but as a deterrent?

I will leave a minute for my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil to conclude, but I am sure that we can all join in saying that we are very proud of our—

Wayne David: Before the Minister sits down—

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. He took far too much time—

Wayne David: Answer some questions then.

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. I have made that clear—

Wayne David: Answer some questions.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) is not in my good books at the moment. Yelling from a sedentary position is not acceptable.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) has successfully eaten into more of my time, so I think he had best remain seated.

To get back to the point, we are all committed—I hope even the hon. Member for Caerphilly—to working hard for our armed forces and ensuring that they have the equipment they need and that we provide support for personnel. Yes, in politically difficult times, that is tough, but we will work hard to ensure that we meet the armed forces’ requirements.

4.29 pm

Mr Fysh: I thank all hon. Members for turning up to this important debate. We have heard that since SDSR 2015 the challenges have increased and so has our need to project our capabilities and to make them available to our allies on a full-spectrum sovereign basis. We heard from many Members about the energy we need and about our potential deficiencies, not least in integration with industrial strategy, which in defence must be an essential consideration.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
**DEFENCE**

**Contingent Liability**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute describing a Contingent Liability (CL) in the region of £150 million associated with Programme HADES.

Programme HADES will provide the continued delivery of motor transport, supply, aircraft and ground engineering, and airfield support services. HADES will replace expiring multi-activity contracts at a number of units from 1 April 2018. The programme will ensure continuity of service provision at minimum cost and is essential to support strategic defence and security review 2015 outcomes.

The maximum CL is in the region of £150 million, which ensured healthy competition from prospective tenderers. There is also a further CL of £643,000 associated with the indemnity given to contractors for terminal redundancy liability associated with ex-authority staff.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sittings days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before the House, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or a motion relating to the matter, or by otherwise raising the matter in the House, final approval will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**Commonwealth Games 2022**

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I wish to inform the House that, on 9 October 2017, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport laid a minute recording the submission of a bid by Commonwealth Games England, Birmingham City Council, the West Midlands Combined Authority and DCMS to host the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham.

Birmingham’s bid presents an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the very best of global Britain to the world, showcasing the UK as a destination for international trade, education and tourism. It has the full backing of Government and will not only help grow the economy in the west midlands and beyond but leave a strong sports legacy by upgrading facilities to benefit both elite athletes and the local community.

The Government will provide around 75% of the net budget costs of delivering the Games and an underwrite of the total event budget, as well as a series of further guarantees which the CGF requests accompany the bid. The bid, therefore, creates contingent liabilities for the UK Government in relation to Commonwealth Games.

The minute notes these liabilities as Government’s commitment to provide funding for the Games, underwrite the costs, and provide a number of further guarantees relating to the successful planning and delivery of the event. These contingent liabilities will only take effect in the event of a successful bid and our agreement of a hosting contract with the Commonwealth Games Federation.

The bid was submitted on 30 September 2017 and, due to the much shorter than usual timeframe in which to prepare the bid, I apologise that there was insufficient time to notify Parliament of our intention before the House returned.

Parliamentarians may signify objections by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament by 31 October. Final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

**EDUCATION**

**Student Finance Update**

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I am today confirming the earnings threshold above which individuals are required to make contributions to the cost of their education from April 2018. I am also confirming the maximum tuition fees for the 2018-19 academic year.

*Earnings threshold*

The earnings threshold will be increased from 6 April 2018. From its current level of £21,000 the threshold will rise to £25,000 for the 2018-19 financial year. Thereafter it will be adjusted annually in line with average earnings.

The new threshold will apply to those who have already taken out and will take out loans for tuition and living costs for full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in the post-2012 system and those who took out or will take an advanced learner loan for a further education course.

The lower threshold for variable interest rates for post-2012 student loans will also rise to £25,000 on 6 April 2018, and the upper threshold will rise to £45,000 from £41,000 on the same date. Both the repayment and variable interest thresholds will be adjusted annually in line with average earnings thereafter. In 2018-19 around 600,000 borrowers will benefit from the threshold changes. Most of those 600,000 borrowers will both make lower contributions and have a lower rate of interest applied.

The repayment thresholds applicable to pre-2012 student loans, the older mortgage style loans and master’s loans are not affected by these changes.

*Tuition fees*

Maximum tuition fee caps will be maintained at 2017-18 academic year levels in the 2018-19 academic year.

For HEFCE funded providers that have a current Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) award and have an access agreement with the Office for Fair Access
(OFFA), the maximum tuition fee for full-time courses will remain £9,250 in 2018-19. For HEFCE funded providers that have a current TEF award but do not have an access agreement with OFFA, the maximum tuition fee for full-time courses will be £6,165 in 2018-19. For HEFCE funded providers that do not have a current TEF award, the maximum tuition fee for full-time courses in 2018-19 will remain £9,000 for providers with an OFFA access agreement and £6,000 for providers without an OFFA access agreement.

Maximum fee loans for all new students and eligible continuing students who started their full-time courses at publicly funded providers on or after 1 September 2012 will be maintained at £9,250 in the 2018-19 academic year.

For continuing students who started their full-time courses before September 2012, maximum tuition fee and fee loan caps at publicly funded providers in 2018-19 will be maintained at £3,465.

For HEFCE funded providers that have a current TEF award and have an access agreement with OFFA, the maximum tuition fee for part-time courses will be £6,935 in 2018-19. For HEFCE funded providers that have a current TEF award, but do not have an access agreement with OFFA, the maximum tuition fee for part-time courses will be £4,625 in 2018-19. For HEFCE funded providers that do not have a current TEF award, the maximum tuition fee for part-time courses in 2018-19 will be £6,750 for providers with an OFFA access agreement and £4,500 for providers without an OFFA access agreement.

Maximum fee loans for all new students and eligible continuing students who started their part-time courses at publicly funded providers on or after 1 September 2012 will be maintained at £6,935 in 2018-19.

For all new students and eligible continuing students who started their full-time courses on or after 1 September 2012 and are undertaking courses at private providers that have a current TEF award, the maximum fee loan will be £6,165 in 2018-19. For private providers that do not have a current TEF award, the maximum fee loan for full-time courses will be £6,000 in 2018/19.

For all new students and eligible continuing students who started their part-time courses on or after 1 September 2012 and are undertaking courses at private providers that have a current TEF award, the maximum fee loan will be £4,625 in 2018-19. For private providers that do not have a current TEF award, the maximum fee loan for part-time courses in 2018-19 will be £4,500.

The Government will set out further steps on HE student financing in due course.

[HCWS145]

HEALTH

Mental Health Act Review

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The Government have commissioned an independent review of mental health legislation and practice to tackle the issue of mental health detention.

There have been concerns that detention rates under the Mental Health Act are too high. The number of detentions has been rising year on year, and last year on average there were 180 cases a day where people were sectioned under the terms of the act. People from black and minority ethnic populations are disproportionately affected, with black people in particular being almost four times more likely than white people to be detained.

The Government are committed to improving mental health services and ensuring that people with mental health problems receive the treatment and support they need, when they need it. This can mean that people need to be made subject to the Mental Health Act—that is, be detained or ‘sectioned’. In these cases, our dedicated professional staff—including psychiatrists, nurses, social workers, and the police—work tirelessly to ensure that people are treated with dignity under the Act, and that their liberty and autonomy are respected as far as possible.

Professor Sir Simon Wessely, former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, will lead the review which will deliver recommendations for change to the Government. Sir Simon will look at the evidence, review practice, and above all consider the needs of service users and their families, and how best the system can help and support them. He will identify improvements in how the Act is used in practice, as well as how we might need to change the Act itself. Vice chairs will be appointed to work with Sir Simon and ensure the leadership of the review has comprehensive professional expertise whilst also being representative of service users and others affected by the Mental Health Act.

Following consultation with stakeholders, Sir Simon will produce an interim report identifying priorities for the review’s work in early 2018, and develop a final report containing detailed recommendations on its priorities, by autumn 2018.


[HCWS143]

Infected Blood: Government Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): In 2016 the Government decided to improve the way we support people who have suffered as a result of the infected blood tragedy of the 1970s and 1980s. At this time the Government committed an additional £125 million of support to those affected, more than doubling the Department of Health’s annual spending on the scheme over the spending review period to April 2021.

Following the 2016 consultation we announced new annual payments for people with chronic hepatitis C (stage 1 infection) and a new one-off payment for bereaved partners and spouses; a new process for those with stage 1 infection to apply for the higher payment amount; and increased annual payments from 2018-19.

In March 2017 we launched a second consultation, looking at the new voluntary process by which those infected by stage 1 Hepatitis C can apply for higher annual payments (the Special Category Mechanism). The Special Category Mechanism aims to benefit beneficiaries with hepatitis C stage 1 who consider their infection, or its treatment, to have a substantial and long-term impact on their ability to carry out routine daily activities.
The consultation was open to all beneficiaries and other interested parties across the UK to comment on our proposals. The consultation closed on 17 April 2017. The Government have listened carefully to the consultation responses, analysed pre and post-consultation evidence from other sources, and reviewed consultation proposals in line with respondents' views and evidence. Following this, the consultation response sets out the Government's plans for reform, which are summarised below:

- Introduction of planned uplifts in annual payments from 2018-19. All beneficiaries will receive an increase in annual payments from 2018-19.
- A new Special Category Mechanism (SCM) for those with hepatitis C infection at stage 1 in November 2017.
- The introduction of a single programme of discretionary support for all—infected and bereaved.
- An increase in the overall level of funding for discretionary support from 2018-19.
- All annual payments will include the winter fuel payment.
- Addition of type 2 or 3 cryoglobulinemia accompanied by membranoproliferative glomerulonephritis, MPGN), to the current hepatitis C stage 2 conditions.

A letter will be sent to the beneficiaries of the English scheme to make them aware of these changes, and advise them on how to access the consultation response, a link to which is also provided as part of this statement. When the SCM process opens beneficiaries with hepatitis C at stage 1 will receive a letter telling them how to apply.

For the first time, all beneficiaries of any of the current five schemes will be receiving support from a single scheme. As previously announced the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) will become the new single scheme administrator in England, with effect from 1 November 2017. While this transition takes place, annual and discretionary payments and services will continue to be made by the current schemes to ensure a smooth transition to the new scheme with minimum impact on the beneficiaries.

The Government strongly believe that all those who are affected by this tragedy should be supported by a fair and transparent scheme that focuses on their welfare and long-term independence. With this additional funding and scheme reform, the support provided to those affected by the infected blood tragedy will be greater and fairer than ever before.

A copy of the full consultation and the related equality analysis can be found on gov.uk using the following link: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/infected-blood-support-special-category-mechanism.

**INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**DFID Supplier Review**

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): The UK is an acknowledged world leader in the provision of development and humanitarian aid. Our aid budget acts not only in the interests of the world's poorest, but also in Britain's long term national interest.

Our global leadership in development requires continuing efforts to improve value for money, efficiency, innovation and effectiveness. I am therefore introducing tough new measures to ensure that the aid managed by DFID contractors delivers the best possible results for the world's poorest people, provides value for taxpayers' money and upholds high standards of ethical and professional behaviour.

A tough new DFID supply partner code of conduct will cover commercial requirements, ethical behaviours, transparency obligations, environmental sustainability and social responsibility. DFID will monitor suppliers' implementation of the code, with legally enforceable sanctions for non-compliance.

DFID will introduce greater transparency to drive down costs along its supply chains. DFID contracts will now include tough new measures to bear down even harder on costs, fees and overheads, and to provide greater transparency in contracts and throughout supply chains. These include open book accounting clauses enabling DFID to obtain, use and verify information from its suppliers to make sure we have access to full financial information on costs to enable us to fully challenge value for money. It will also include a clause which we can use if necessary to intervene to ensure a fair deal for the taxpayer.

DFID will open up procurement to new entrants in the UK and overseas, simplifying documentation and processes and making greater use of digital platforms and social media to allow potential suppliers to access contract opportunities. A programme of business engagement events in the UK and overseas will facilitate engagement by new suppliers and the Department will also carry out research into the specific barriers facing by local suppliers in developing countries in accessing contract opportunities.

DFID will level the playing field for small suppliers and sub-contractors, ending the imposition of agreements which restrict sub-contractors’ ability to work for other suppliers. It will introduce new protections for small suppliers and sub-contractors operating in consortia, including contract checks to eradicate so called “bid candy” practices in which major suppliers drop sub-contractors once they have won the contract. We will continue to break up suitable tenders into manageable sizes and services to better enable smaller suppliers to compete.

A robust, comprehensive approach to supplier management will enable the Department to hold suppliers to account across their entire portfolio of work with DFID, bringing DFID into line with best practice in the private sector. This will allow DFID to challenge delivery partners more strongly on value for money, identify underlying performance problems and tap into a supplier's wider areas of expertise.

DFID will put more information in the public domain, so that members of the public can assure themselves directly that DFID's aid is being used effectively. This will include a policy on allowable costs in day rates paid to consultants and annual league tables of supplier performance. We will publish annual information on our commercial practices, setting out performance during the year and making further recommendations for improvement.

These reforms will complement the detailed line-by-line review of every programme in DFID's portfolio, either already approved or in design phase, carried out by my ministerial team. They will help to ensure maximum
impact from the development programmes delivered by DFID’s contractors, complementing the work done in the civil society partnership review to strengthen value for money from grants to civil society organisations, and in the multilateral development review to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the international development system.

[HCWS141]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Update

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The DUP and Sinn Fein continue their discussions towards the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland. The parties have reduced the number of issues between them—including on some aspects of language and culture—but clear differences still remain. The Government are committed to continuing to work with all the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government, consistent with the three-stranded approach, towards reaching agreement quickly. I have been in regular contact with party leaders and Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney and will have further meetings in Belfast this week. The Prime Minister has been actively involved throughout this process. This has included her recent meeting with the Taoiseach and discussions with the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Fein. She shares the high priority which I place on the Government being ready and willing to work tirelessly to support the restoration of the Northern Ireland devolved institutions.

It is crucial that, with this support, the parties continue to do their utmost to reach an agreement which allows them to make those decisions which are important to the people of Northern Ireland. The parties have shown leadership and the ability to look beyond their differences in the past to resolve significant challenges which have separated them. I have urged the parties to focus their remaining efforts and energies on closing the outstanding gaps swiftly to find a resolution which will pave the way for the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland. With the right spirit of compromise this can be achieved and now is the time to come together and reach agreement.

I stand ready to bring forward legislation to enable an Executive to be formed quickly once agreement has been reached. But the timeframe for this is not indefinite. As Secretary of State, I have a responsibility for good governance and political stability in Northern Ireland—which has now been without a full Executive for 10 months. If devolved Government is not restored in the next few weeks, I will consider carefully what steps are needed in the best interests of the people, the voluntary sector, public services and businesses in Northern Ireland. As a minimum, this would involve introducing legislation later this month to set a budget for 2017-18 putting Northern Ireland on a path towards greater UK Government intervention in its day to day affairs.

We are not at this point yet. It is in the best interests of Northern Ireland and its people to have strategic decisions taken by locally elected politicians in the interests of the whole community. That is why the Government remain resolute in their efforts with the parties to secure the outcome which a majority of Northern Ireland want and need: the restoration of devolution. Ultimately, it is for the parties to reach agreement, but Northern Ireland has come so far and I encourage the parties to keep this firmly in mind as they work towards finding that resolution.

[HCWS147]
Written Statements
Tuesday 10 October 2017

TREASY

Double Taxation Convention: UK and Belarus

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):
A Double Taxation Convention with Belarus was signed on 26 September 2017. The text of the convention has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and has been made available on HM Revenue and Customs’ pages of the gov.uk website. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS150]

ECOFIN and Informal ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Luxembourg on 10 October. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following items:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief Ministers on the outcomes of the 9 October meeting of the Eurogroup, and Ministers will discuss the current economic situation. Ministers will also discuss the European Commission’s use of discretion in assessing member states’ compliance with the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP).

Current financial service legislative proposals

The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Definitive VAT system

The Commission will present their proposals for a definitive VAT system and the creation of a ‘single EU VAT area’.

European semester 2017

The Council will exchange views on a report evaluating the 2017 European semester process and reflect on lessons learnt.

Preparation of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings between 12 and 15 October in Washington

Ministers will agree the EU’s G20 terms of reference and International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) statement, ahead of the annual meetings in Washington.

Climate finance for COP23

The Council will agree Council conclusions on climate finance in preparation for the COP23 UN climate change conference in November.

Digital taxation

The Commission will present its communication of 21 September on ‘a fair and efficient tax system in the EU for the digital single market’. As well as input from the presidency, the Commission will also provide a follow-up to the Tallinn digital summit that was held on 29 September.

Implementation of financial services legislation

Ministers will receive an update from the Commission on implementation of existing financial services legislation.

An informal meeting of The Economic and Financial Affairs Council was held in Tallinn on 15-16 September 2017. The UK was represented by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Philip Hammond). EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

Working lunch—deepening the economic and monetary union (EMU) and maximising the effectiveness of EU finances

Based on the European Commission reflection papers, Ministers discussed the interlinkages between future development of the economic and monetary union and the framework on EU finances.

Working session I

Ministers were joined by Central Bank Governors for the first Working Session. Two items were discussed.

a) Deepening of the EMU: interaction of rules and institutions

Ministers and Central Bank Governors discussed the implications of the deepening of the economic and monetary union for the EU’s economic and fiscal policy framework.

b) Capital markets union: Technological Innovation and Financial Regulation (FinTech)

Ministers and Central Bank Governors then focused on the implications of intensified technological innovations to the functioning, development and stability of banking and capital markets. The discussion drew on analysis by Bruegel and included participation from the European Parliament, the European Central Bank, the Commission, and the European Securities and Markets Authority.

Working session II

a) Corporate taxation challenges of the digital economy

Following a presentation by the Estonian presidency, Ministers discussed how to modernise the corporate income tax rules in a way that would take into account the new business modes using digital technology. Commissioner Dombrovskis and José Ángel Gurria (Secretary-General of the OECD) also contributed to the discussion to set out their respective positions.

b) Cost efficiency and sustainability of customs IT systems

Ministers discussed the governance reform of the customs union, particularly considering customs IT infrastructure that would assure the sustainable and cost efficient electronic systems worthy of a digital single market. This builds on previous discussions regarding the development of an EU customs IT strategy and looks to proposals for a centrally developed customs IT system to be rolled out across Europe from 2025.

[HCWS149]

DEFENCE

Royal Air Force Battle Honours

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mark Lancaster): My right hon. Friend The Minister in the House of Lords (The right hon. The Earl Howe PC) has made the following written statement:

I am today announcing that Her Majesty The Queen has been graciously pleased to approve the award of Battle Honours to squadrons of Her Majesty’s Royal Air Force, for their participation in Operation TELIC during the period 1 May 2003 to 22 May 2011, Operation DEFEERENCE during the period 22 February 2011 to 27 February 2011 and Operation ELLAMY during the period 19 March 2011 to 31 October 2011.

Battle Honours may be “awarded to commemorate any notable battle, action or engagement in which aircrew or Royal Air Force Regiment personnel played a memorable part”. There are two levels of Battle Honour within the Royal Air Force. The first is “mere entitlement, signifying only that a squadron took part in
the campaign”. The second (higher) level confers the right to embazon the Battle Honour on the Standard itself. This ultimate accolade is reserved for those squadrons which are involved in direct confrontation with an enemy, and demonstrate gallantry and spirit under fire.

Battle Honours were approved for 27 operational flying squadrons and eight Royal Air Force Regiment squadrons for their participation on Operation TELIC. Five operational flying squadrons and three Royal Air Force Regiment squadrons were awarded the highest honour of Battle Honour with Emblazonment.

For their part in Operation DEFFERENCE and Operation ELLAMY, Battle Honours were approved for 13 operational flying squadrons with three being awarded the highest honour of Battle Honour with Emblazonment.

With the Right to Embazon 'IRAQ 2003-2011' on Squadron Standards
No. 7 Squadron RAF
No. XXIV Squadron RAF
No. 33 Squadron RAF
No. 47 Squadron RAF
No. 230 Squadron RAF
No. 1 Squadron RAF Regiment
No. 26 Squadron RAF Regiment
No. 34 Squadron RAF Regiment

Without the Right to Embazon 'IRAQ 2003-2011' on Squadron Standards
No. II (Army Co-operation) Squadron RAF
No. IX (Bomber) Squadron RAF
No. 10 Squadron RAF
No. 12 (Bomber) Squadron RAF
No. XIII Squadron RAF
No. 14 Squadron RAF
No. 18 Squadron RAF
No. 27 Squadron RAF
No. XXVIII (Army Co-operation) Squadron RAF
No. 30 Squadron RAF
No. 31 Squadron RAF
No. 32 (The Royal) Squadron RAF
No. 39 (Photographic Reconnaissance) Squadron RAF
No. 51 Squadron RAF
No. LXX Squadron RAF
No. 99 Squadron RAF
No. 101 Squadron RAF
No. 120 Squadron RAF
No. 201 Squadron RAF
No. 206 Squadron RAF
No. 216 Squadron RAF
No. 617 Squadron RAF
No. II Squadron RAF Regiment
No. 3 Squadron RAF Regiment
No. 15 Squadron RAF Regiment
No. 51 Squadron RAF Regiment
No. 63 Squadron RAF Regiment

With the Right to Embazon ‘LIBYA 2011’ on Squadron Standards
No. II (Army Co-operation) Squadron RAF
RAF No. IX (Bomber) Squadron RAF
No. 47 Squadron RAF

Without the Right to Embazon ‘LIBYA 2011’ on Squadron Standards
No. 3 (Fighter) Squadron RAF
No. V (Army Co-operation) Squadron RAF
No. VIII Squadron RAF
No. XI Squadron RAF
No. 30 Squadron RAF
No. 32 (The Royal) Squadron RAF
No. 51 Squadron RAF

No. 99 Squadron RAF
No. 101 Squadron RAF
No. 216 Squadron RAF

[HCWS148]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): My right hon. Friend Baroness Anelay of St Johns DBE, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting in Brussels on Monday 25 September. This was the first meeting of the GAC under the Estonian presidency.

The main items on the agenda were: presentation of the priorities of the Estonian presidency; preparation of the European Council on 19-20 October 2017; June European Council follow-up; and legislative programming for 2018, letter of intent.


Presentation of the priorities of the Estonian presidency

The presidency made a brief presentation of its priorities, namely: an open and innovative European economy; a safe and secure Europe; a digital Europe and the free movement of data; and an inclusive and sustainable Europe.

Preparation of the European Council on 19-20 October 2017

The presidency presented the draft October European Council agenda, which is due to cover migration, digital Europe, defence and external relations.

On the migration agenda item, GAC Ministers discussed external migration and returns, as well as reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

As part of the digital Europe item, delegates focused on implementation of the Digital Single Market (DSM), cyber security and digital taxation.

Regarding defence, the Council considered increasing EU autonomy, the admissions criteria for the Permanent Structured co-operation (PESCO) and EU-NATO co-operation. There were also discussions about the work on the industrial development programme and the Athena mechanism (which handles the financing of common costs relating to EU military operations under the EU’s common security) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Under external relations, Ministers discussed EU-Turkey relations and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Some member states also asked that trade should be added to the agenda, as well as the follow-up to the June European Council.

I intervened to highlight the UK’s on-going commitment to European security and reiterated our preference for counter-terrorism and internal security to be discussed at the European Council. I also welcomed the focus on the digital agenda, as well as the need to maintain momentum following the Tallinn summit on 29 September.

Regarding EU-Turkey relations, I emphasised the importance of the accession process as an important tool for co-operation with Turkey. I also agreed that a unified EU position should be sought on the DPRK.

Legislative programming for 2018, letter of intent

GAC Ministers discussed the Commission’s priorities for the Commission Work Programme (CWP) 2018. Vice President Timmermans asked for a final mandate on the CWP and stressed the need to focus on delivery within the limited time available. I intervened to welcome the inclusion of certain aspects in the CWP, including the Single Market and DSM. I also spoke to advocate for open and free trade.
AOB

Vice President Timmermans updated Ministers on the state of play of its dialogue with Poland on the Rule of Law. I emphasised the importance the UK placed on the Rule of Law and urged both the Commission and Poland to avoid escalation and return to substantive, sustained and constructive dialogue.

[HCWS151]

JUSTICE

Justice and Home Affairs Pre-Council Statement

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers will meet on 12 and 13 October in Luxembourg. The Minister of State for Immigration, and I will represent the UK for Justice day. The Home Secretary will represent the UK for Interior day.

Justice day (12 October) will begin with the adoption of the Council Regulation on the establishment of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO). No discussion is expected. We have always been clear that the UK will never participate in an EPPO. This will be followed by a policy debate on the proposed Regulation on mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders. The focus of the discussion is expected to be on whether the scope of the legislation applies to such orders issued within the framework of criminal proceedings or criminal matters. Such a debate would have no specific impact on the UK’s position and so we would not need to intervene. The UK is supportive of improved co-operation in this area and has opted into this measure.

Ministers will also discuss the proposed Regulation on the exchange of information on third country nationals and as regards the European Criminal Records Information System (ECRIS). The UK supports the inclusion of third country nationals on ECRIS, including fingerprint exchange. The focus of this debate will be on the threshold for the seriousness of the crime above which fingerprints should be taken, and whether dual nationals should be included in the centralised identification system (ECRIS-TCN). The Immigration Minister will support a low fingerprint threshold, as well as the inclusion of dual nationals in ECRIS-TCN.

The next item will be an exchange of views with the Director of the Fundamental Rights Agency, which will cover the agency’s 2017 fundamental rights report and a range of fundamental rights issues. The Council will then adopt the draft Council conclusions following the EU’s annual report on the application of the EU charter on fundamental rights in 2016. The UK is content to support the Council conclusions.

There will be a working lunch discussion on the implementation of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This discussion will be an exchange of views on readiness for implementation. The GDPR will apply in the UK from 25 May 2018.

In the afternoon, Interior and Justice Ministers will meet for a joint session. This will include a Commission update and discussion on criminal justice in cyberspace where the presidency will update member states on the progress of ongoing discussions around e-evidence and encryption. The UK is supportive of work in these areas and has been engaged in technical discussions. The UK is keen to ensure that any proposals do not jeopardise the existing good cooperation with service providers.

Finally on Justice day, as part of the presidency’s mid-term review of the JHA strategic guidelines, Ministers will be asked for their views on where progress has been made and where there are outstanding policy priorities. The Immigration Minister will highlight the UK’s ongoing policy priorities, including data retention for law enforcement purposes and improving the interoperability of EU systems.

Interior day (13 October) will begin with a discussion on reform of the Schengen Borders Code to change the rules applicable to the temporary reintroduction of border controls at internal borders. As the UK is not a part of the Schengen internal border free zone, the Home Secretary will not intervene on this item.

Interior day will continue with a discussion on counter-terrorism. There will be a presentation by the Counter Terrorism Group (CTG). The CTG will report their assessment of the threat, update on recent capability developments and feedback on work to improve co-operation with the law enforcement community. The Home Secretary is likely to intervene in support of recent of the recent developments of the group.

The Council will conclude with a working lunch at which Ministers will exchange views on the state of play of the migration crisis. The presidency will focus the debate on the resettlement of refugees. In line with the request of the European Commission, the UK will submit a revised resettlement pledge by 31 October 2017.

[HCWS152]
The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I wish to inform the House that, on 11 October, the Department for Digital Culture and Media and Sport will publish the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper. The accompanying public consultation will close on 7 December 2017. Both can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/internet-safety-strategy-green-paper.

The strategy was publically announced in February of this year and will give effect to our manifesto commitment to “make Britain the safest place in the world to be online”.

The strategy considers the responsibilities of companies to their users, the use of technical solutions to prevent online harms and Government’s role in supporting users. It is underpinned by three key principles: what is unacceptable offline should be unacceptable online; all users should be empowered to manage online risks and stay safe; and technology companies have a responsibility to their users.

The strategy represents the first strand of our digital charter work which will ensure that every individual and every business can seize the opportunities of digital technology. We are developing the digital charter by working with companies, civil society and others to establish a strong framework that balances freedom with protection for users, and offers opportunities alongside obligations for businesses and platforms. The manifesto made it clear that the Government will act when people need more protections to keep them safe, including online.

The Digital Economy Act 2017 requires a voluntary code of practice to be established, to set guidance on what social media providers should do in relation to harmful conduct on their platforms. The Internet Safety Strategy consults on the form this should take as part of a wider framework for industry responsibility, including an annual transparency report by social media platforms and a social media levy to enable greater public awareness of online safety and enable preventative measures against online harms.

The strategy is being undertaken alongside new age verification measures for pornography. The Digital Economy Act introduced the requirement for commercial providers of online pornography to have robust age verification controls in place to prevent children and young people under 18 from accessing pornographic material. This measure is due to be in place in April 2018—12 months after the Act received Royal Assent.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life is separately leading an inquiry into the intimidation of parliamentary candidates, including through online platforms. The measures in the strategy, such as the responsibilities of companies to their users, will usefully support Government’s objectives in these areas.

**Sexual Assault**
European Bank of Reconstruction and Development

We also wish to record that in 2016 a former attaché at the Canadian High Commission was convicted at Southwark Crown Court of three counts of making indecent photographs/pseudo-photograph of a child; one count of possessing a prohibited image of a child; one count of possessing an extreme pornographic image; and one count of failing to comply with a section 49 Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act notice. The former attaché was sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment.

These offences were not recorded in last year’s written outcome of criminal proceedings. and their previous inclusion might have prejudiced the ministerial statement because the case was then sub-judice

Figures for previous years are available in the Secretary for State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs’ written statement to the House on 21 July 2016, *Official Report*, column 40WS [HCWS106].

[HHCWS155]

**Diplomatic Missions and International Organisations: Debts**

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has held meetings with a number of missions about outstanding parking fine debt, outstanding national non-domestic rates payments and unpaid congestion charge debt. The director of protocol raises the issue in his introductory meetings with all new ambassadors and high commissioners whose missions are in debt to the relevant authorities. FCO officials also press diplomatic missions and international organisations to pay outstanding fines and debts. In April this year, protocol directorate wrote to diplomatic missions and international organisations concerned giving them the opportunity to either pay their outstanding debts, or appeal against specific fines if they considered that they had been issued incorrectly.

Parking fines: in 2016, 4,311 parking fines incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London were brought to our attention by local councils, Transport for London and the City of London. These totalled at least\(^ {\text{a}} \) £430,126.

Subsequent payments (including amounts waived by the above authorities) totalled £102,164. There remains a total of £327,962 in unpaid fines for 2016.

The table below details those diplomatic missions and international organisations that have outstanding fines from 2016 totalling £1,000 or more, as of 28 June 2017.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diplomatic Mission/International Organisation</th>
<th>Amount of Outstanding Fines (excluding congestion charge) £</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>£7,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia</td>
<td>£6,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman</td>
<td>£4,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea</td>
<td>£4,565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan</td>
<td>£4,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of France</td>
<td>£4,035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>£3,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan</td>
<td>£3,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Liberia</td>
<td>£3,375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the State of Qatar</td>
<td>£2,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam</td>
<td>£2,665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan</td>
<td>£2,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan</td>
<td>£2,520</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Commission for the United Republic of Tanzania</td>
<td>£2,055</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of Libya</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Angola</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Sierra Leone</td>
<td>£1,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Yemen</td>
<td>£1,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Ghana</td>
<td>£1,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Iraq</td>
<td>£1,575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria</td>
<td>£1,435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the People’s Republic of China</td>
<td>£1,365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Kosovo</td>
<td>£1,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the State of Kuwait</td>
<td>£1,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of South Africa</td>
<td>£1,195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Georgia</td>
<td>£1,065</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^ {\text{a}}\)The figure of £430,126 excludes the value of parking fines issued by Barnet Council in 2016, because Barnet Council failed to provide the FCO on request with the value of the fines it had issued.

**National non-domestic rates (NNDR):** the majority of diplomatic missions in the United Kingdom pay the NNDR due from them. Diplomatic missions are obliged to pay only 6% of the total NNDR value of their offices. This represents payment for specific services received such as street cleaning and street lighting.

As at 8 June 2017, the total amount of outstanding NNDR payments, due before 31 December 2016, owed by foreign diplomatic missions as advised by the valuation office agency is £1,049,999, an increase of 16% over the 2015 figure, as reported in the 2016 WMS (£907,976). However, £51,573 of this outstanding debt is owed by

The table below details the amount of unpaid NNDR due from various diplomatic missions for the financial year 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diplomatic Mission/International Organisation</th>
<th>Amount of Outstanding NNDR 2016 £</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>£7,040</td>
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<td>Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia</td>
<td>£6,440</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan</td>
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<tr>
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<td>High Commission for the Republic of South Africa</td>
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<td>Embassy of Georgia</td>
<td>£1,065</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures for previous years are available in the Secretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs’ written statement to the House on 21 July 2016, *Official Report*, column 40WS [HCWS106].

[HHCWS155]
Syria—which is not currently represented in the UK and we have therefore been unable to pursue this debt. Four missions are responsible for just over a third of the remainder. We shall continue to urge those with NNDR debt to pay their dues.

The table below details those diplomatic missions that, as of 8 June 2017, owed over £10,000 in respect of NNDR due before 31 December 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Fines</th>
<th>Total Outstanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany</td>
<td>36,258</td>
<td>£4,221,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Poland</td>
<td>31,780</td>
<td>£3,854,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the People’s Republic of China</td>
<td>30,317</td>
<td>£3,805,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner for Ghana</td>
<td>28,630</td>
<td>£3,465,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Sudan</td>
<td>26,161</td>
<td>£3,048,475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan</td>
<td>24,032</td>
<td>£2,947,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Kenya</td>
<td>20,844</td>
<td>£2,453,305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of France</td>
<td>17,570</td>
<td>£2,090,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the United Republic of Tanzania</td>
<td>16,183</td>
<td>£1,893,325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan</td>
<td>15,979</td>
<td>£1,971,105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Spain</td>
<td>15,855</td>
<td>£1,893,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Korea</td>
<td>14,777</td>
<td>£1,805,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Romania</td>
<td>13,069</td>
<td>£1,547,415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of South Africa</td>
<td>12,963</td>
<td>£1,503,195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cuba</td>
<td>12,744</td>
<td>£1,557,555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Algeria</td>
<td>12,694</td>
<td>£1,495,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Sierra Leone</td>
<td>12,038</td>
<td>£1,404,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Greece</td>
<td>11,759</td>
<td>£1,380,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Hungary</td>
<td>9,157</td>
<td>£1,097,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Cyprus</td>
<td>8,588</td>
<td>£1,030,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Zambia</td>
<td>7,481</td>
<td>£882,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Yemen</td>
<td>7,475</td>
<td>£889,990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria</td>
<td>6,853</td>
<td>£797,035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon</td>
<td>5,923</td>
<td>£692,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Belarus</td>
<td>5,796</td>
<td>£680,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Malawi</td>
<td>5,576</td>
<td>£663,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Botswana</td>
<td>5,515</td>
<td>£667,605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Slovak Republic</td>
<td>5,493</td>
<td>£641,215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia</td>
<td>5,243</td>
<td>£608,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Namibia</td>
<td>5,186</td>
<td>£602,145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Mozambique</td>
<td>5,182</td>
<td>£611,340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Zimbabwe</td>
<td>5,120</td>
<td>£575,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Kingdom of Swaziland</td>
<td>5,008</td>
<td>£581,510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>4,673</td>
<td>£553,865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Malta</td>
<td>4,533</td>
<td>£546,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>4,428</td>
<td>£519,215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania</td>
<td>4,353</td>
<td>£521,270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Turkey</td>
<td>4,344</td>
<td>£530,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Austria</td>
<td>4,290</td>
<td>£513,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Mauritius</td>
<td>4,223</td>
<td>£494,495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**London congestion charge**: the value of unpaid congestion charge debt incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London since its introduction in February 2003 until 31 December 2016 as advised by Transport for London (TfL) was £105,419,835. The table below shows those diplomatic missions and international organisations with outstanding fines of £100,000 or more.
The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I wish to inform the House that I am today introducing a change to the dedicated immigration policy for residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk.

The Government have been clear that their priority is to ensure that survivors of this tragedy get the access they need to vital services, irrespective of immigration status.

On 5 July, we announced that those individuals directly affected by the Grenfell Tower fire who contact the Home Office via a specified process will be given a period of limited leave for 12 months to remain in the UK with full access to relevant support and assistance.

Our initial response to this terrible tragedy was rightly focused on survivors’ immediate needs in the aftermath of the fire and ensuring they could access the services they need to start to rebuild their lives.

However, since the Grenfell Tower immigration policy was announced, we have been planning for the future of those residents affected by these unprecedented events and listening to their feedback, as well as the views of Sir Martin Moore-Bick.

The Government believe it is right to provide the specific group of survivors who are eligible for limited leave to remain under the dedicated immigration policy greater certainty over their long-term future in the UK, subject to their continued eligibility and the necessary security and criminality and fraud checks being met.

That is why I am announcing today that those who qualify for leave to remain under the Grenfell immigration policy for survivors will now be provided with a route to permanent settlement in the UK.

Eligible individuals, who have already come forward or do so by 30 November 2017, will be granted an initial 12 months’ limited leave which will be extendable and lead to permanent residence after a total period of five years’ leave granted under the policy, subject to meeting security, criminality and fraud checks.

I also wish to inform the House of additional support for relatives of survivors or relatives of victims of the tragedy who have already been granted entry to the UK for reasons relating to the Grenfell tragedy. The changes I am announcing today will enable relatives to stay in the UK for up to six months from their date of entry. This new dedicated immigration policy allows relatives who have come to the UK and who were initially granted less than six months’ leave in order to provide a short period of support a survivor or to arrange the funeral of a family member to extend their stay to six months in total.

Anyone who believes they are eligible for either scheme can speak face-to-face to a specialist Home Office team at the Community Assistance Centre, 10 Bard Road, Nottingdale, West London, W10 6TP.

There are existing immigration policies which allow us to consider compassionate circumstances where someone is not covered by the bespoke policies for survivors and relatives and any such applications would be considered on a case by case basis.
TRANSPORT

Silvertown Tunnel Development

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I have been asked by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, to make this written ministerial statement. This statement concerns the application made by Transport for London under the Planning Act 2008 on 29 April 2016 for a proposed development known as Silvertown Tunnel.

The application will allow for the construction of a new twin bore road tunnel to pass under the River Thames, providing a new connection between the A102 Blackwall Tunnel southern approach and the Tidal Basin roundabout junction on the A1020 Lower Lea Crossing, London.

Under sub-section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority’s report unless exercising the power under sub-section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to Parliament announcing the new deadline. The Secretary of State received the Examining Authority’s report on Silvertown Tunnel on 11 July 2017 and the current deadline for a decision is 11 October 2017.

The deadline for the decision is to be extended to 10 November 2017 (an extension of one month). This extension is to enable further consideration of the recent responses to the Secretary of State consultations on the scheme which relate to the updated UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations published by Government on 26 July 2017.

The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to give development consent.

[HCWS153]
The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): The Government are today publishing the clean growth strategy— an ambitious strategy to cut emissions while keeping costs down for consumers, creating good jobs and growing the economy. This is an important component of our modern industrial strategy. We are also laying our responses to the Committee on Climate Change’s 2017 progress report to Parliament and publishing a suite of related documents.

Clean growth can make a real difference to people’s lives, from reducing energy bills and improving air quality, to supporting new technologies and boosting earning power in high-quality jobs.

We start from a position of strength. We have already made significant progress towards our legally binding 2050 target to reduce emissions by at least 80% against 1990 levels. We exceeded the target emissions reductions of our first carbon budget (2008 to 2012) by 1% of the budget level and we project that we will outperform against our second and third budgets covering the years 2013 to 2022 by almost 5% and 4% respectively.

The UK is a world leader in cutting emissions while growing the economy. Provisional statistics indicate that UK emissions in 2016 were 42% lower than in 1990 and 6% below those in 2015. At the same time, the UK’s GDP has increased by 67% since 1990 showing that a strong, growing economy can go hand in hand with reduced emissions. On a per person basis, this means that we have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation and led the G7 group in growth national income over the period.

The global transition to a low-carbon economy offers huge growth opportunities which the UK is well placed to take advantage of as a core element of our industrial strategy. Our low-carbon sector already employs over 230,000 people directly and another 200,000 through supply chains. Analysis for the Committee on Climate Change estimated that the low-carbon economy has the potential to grow 11% per year between 2015 and 2030—four times faster than the rest of the economy.

While we have performed strongly to date, the task ahead is significant. The clean growth strategy sets out policies and proposals across the whole of the economy and the country including business, housing, transport, power, the natural environment and the public sector.

Low-carbon innovation is at the heart of our approach, with over £2.5 billion of Government investment from 2015 to 2021. This forms part of the largest increase in public spending on UK science, research and innovation in almost 40 years.

The clean growth strategy is an important milestone in the UK’s work to cut emissions and grow the economy. But it is not the end of the process. Clean technology is developing at a rapid pace and costs are falling faster than many predicted—for example, the cost of offshore wind has halved in two years. We look forward to working with colleagues across both Houses and the devolved Administrations, and with people and organisations across the country, to ensure the UK can continue to lead the world in clean growth.

[HCWS158]

EU Environmental Council

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): I will attend the EU Environment Council, which will take place on 13 October in Luxembourg.

Following adoption of the agenda, the list of “A” items will be approved.

Under legislative proposals, the Council will debate two proposals with the aim to get an agreement in the Council of Ministers:

A regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on binding annual greenhouse gas emission reductions by member states from 2021 to 2030 for a resilient energy union and to meet commitments under the Paris agreement and amending regulation No 525/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council on a mechanism for monitoring and reporting greenhouse gas emissions and other information relevant to climate change. This is known as the effort sharing regulation (ESR).

A regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry into the 2030 climate and energy framework and amending regulation No 525/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council on a mechanism for monitoring and reporting greenhouse gas emissions and other information relevant to climate change. This is known as the land use, land use change and forestry regulation (LULUCF).

Under non-legislative proposals, the Council will seek to adopt conclusions on the EU priorities for the third meeting of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-3), and on the preparations for the 23rd session of the conference of the parties (COP 23) to the United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC).

The following items will be discussed under any other business:

1. Reports on recent international meetings:
   - Sixth session of the meeting of the parties (MOP 6) to the convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters (Aarhus convention).
   - Joint high-level segment under the meetings of the parties to the Aarhus convention and its protocol on PRTRs.
   - Third session of the meeting of the parties (MOPP 3) to the protocol on pollutant release and transfer registers.
   - First meeting of the conference of the parties to the Minamata convention on mercury (COP 1), (Geneva, 24-29 September 2017)
   - 13th meeting of the conference of the parties to the United Nations convention to combat desertification (UNCCD COP13)

2. A more transparent, more effective and safer assessment of chemical substances.

3. Importance, for the implementation of the Paris agreement, of good co-ordination and coherence between the integrated national energy and climate plans for 2030 and the long-term emissions reduction strategies, as well as of minimum quality, comparability and transparency standards.

4. 50th session of the international seminar “Science for Peace the World Over” (Erice, Italy, 20-23 August 2017).
The UK has also secured an additional AOB to encourage those member states who are ready to proceed with early ratification of the Kigali amendment to the UN Montreal protocol to protect the Earth’s ozone layer to do so in time for the 30th anniversary meeting of the parties to the protocol, in Montreal this November. Last October, agreement was reached in Kigali to amend the protocol to phase down hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) globally by around 85% by the mid-2040s. This could avoid up to 0.5 °C of global warming by the end of the century, making a major contribution to the Paris climate goal of a 2 °C limit. The amendment will come into force in 2019 as long as at least 20 countries have ratified by then.

TREASURY

Spending Authority

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):

It is important that Departments can start spending to prepare for Brexit when they need to do so. Managing public money requires that expenditure on new services must rest on specific legislation. However, delaying spending until legislation has reached Royal Assent could jeopardise readiness for Brexit.

To address this, for the small proportion of spending affected, Ministers can issue a technical direction, allowing critical spending to be incurred ahead of Royal Assent, whilst ensuring transparency to Parliament.

In these cases, the use of a direction will be a matter of timing. Departments will still need to ensure spending is in all other respects regular, proper, feasible and good value for money, in the usual way. I have asked my officials to write to all Departments explaining this process. They will also write to the Public Accounts Committee—this letter will be published to ensure full transparency.

As confirmed yesterday, by the Prime Minister to the House and by the Chancellor to the Treasury Committee, the Treasury has committed over £250 million of additional spending in 2017-18 to prepare for Brexit from the reserve. Departmental allocations will be set out at supplementary estimates in the usual way. An update on Brexit spending will also be provided at the Autumn Budget.

HEALTH

General Practice Indemnity

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):

Rising cost of indemnity is a great source of concern for general practitioners (GPs). Our ambition is to deliver a more stable and more affordable system for GPs and their patients. The scheme could provide financially sustainable cover for future, and potentially historic, claims arising from the delivery of NHS services.

The Department has benefited from the engagement with the four Medical Defence Organisations (MDOs) and GP representatives over recent months. Any new scheme should meet the needs of current and future GPs, be in the interest of patients and represent value for money for taxpayers. Transfer of historic liabilities from MDOs to a new scheme would be dependent on satisfactory negotiation with the MDOs.

We will explore with GP representatives how to embed new indemnity arrangements, including the future costs, into GP contract negotiations. The Department will set up a stakeholder group and arrange a first roundtable next month with the Royal College of General Practitioners, the British Medical Association and other GP representatives to gather views from general practice and agree how best to engage with the sector going forward.

Any scheme would take at least 12 to 18 months to establish and require careful negotiation. GPs should continue to ensure they have appropriate indemnity cover in line with General Medical Council requirements to enable them to practise. NHS England has already committed to provide additional funding to GP practices to cover the estimated annual indemnity inflation for 2016-17 and 2017-18. NHS England has also announced additional money for indemnity cover over the coming winter.

Indemnity arrangements are a devolved matter and the Department will continue to liaise with the devolved Administrations, who will make their own decisions about indemnity provision in their territories.

TRANSPORT

Rail Infrastructure Funding 2019 - 2024

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I am today publishing my final statement of funds available for the railway in England and Wales for control period 6, which covers the years 2019 to 2024. This follows my publication of a high level output specification and initial statement of funds available on 20 July.

The high level output specification made clear that the Government are determined that the railway becomes more focused on issues that matter most to passengers—such as punctuality and reliability. It therefore focused on the operation, maintenance and renewal of the railway—areas which are crucial to delivering a more reliable railway. At the time of its publication, the Government deferred publication of a final statement of funds available, following more work to establish Network Rail’s costs and the scope for efficiency savings across control period 6.
This work has now concluded. On the basis of further work by Network Rail, of continued scrutiny by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR)—including through its independent reporter, Nichols—and through work by my Department and HM Treasury to challenge costings, Government are now in a position to set out their funding envelope for control period 6.

At this stage we expect around £47.9 billion to be spent on the railway across control period 6. Of this, we expect up to £34.7 billion to be provided directly via Government grant, with the remainder coming from a combination of track access charges and income from other sources, such as Network Rail’s property portfolio. These amounts will be refined during the regulatory process, which will produce by summer 2018 detailed draft amounts for the 2019 to 2024 period for consultation. Budgets will be set at route level, as part of the devolution of more accountability and authority to Network Rail routes, driving change in the organisation. The regulatory process will conclude with a final determination in October 2018.

During this process I expect the regulator to provide a strong efficiency challenge to maximise value for money, and the ORR has substantially changed its regulatory approach to help achieve this.

We have some of the most intensively used railways in Europe, and this investment focuses on the essential work needed to ensure their safety and reliability, including funding to support a significant increase in renewals activity compared to the current period, and increased maintenance spend to allow Network Rail to meet the challenges of a busier network. This investment recognises the critical importance of these activities in preserving the day to day operation of the railway.

I believe that a renewed focus on core railway activities will help return train performance to the levels that passengers expect and deserve. Overall, this significant funding demonstrates Government’s continued commitment to investing in the railway for the benefit of passengers, communities, the supply chain and the wider economy.

The Government have already made clear that they expect new enhancements to the rail network to be developed outside of the regulatory system. However, the statement of funds available published today includes funding to continue to take forward the enhancements that were deferred from control period 5. In line with the new process for enhancements these schemes will continue to be subject to ongoing consideration to ensure they deliver the best results for both rail users and taxpayers. In addition to this, I am making funding available for the early-stage development of new enhancement schemes. I will announce further details on a new process for taking forward enhancements later in the year. We need to ensure investment best addresses the needs of passengers and freight, and that funding commitments appropriately reflect the stage of development of those enhancements.

Furthermore, the statement of funds available also includes funding for continued investment in improvements to both the accessibility of the railway and the rail freight network. Our commitment to funding accessibility improvements in the railway further emphasises our drive to ensure that the railway is accessible to all. The Government have recognised the crucial role that rail freight plays in supporting the economy and the environment and our continued investment in the freight network recognises this.

Given the need to spend public money wisely and to incentivise the industry to do so, I believe the funding envelope published today is stretching yet achievable. I will continue to push Network Rail to improve its effectiveness and efficiency. In particular I support an ambitious approach to route devolution, so that Network Rail is more focused on its customers. I will also modernise the Government’s oversight and assurance arrangements for Network Rail to properly reflect its public sector status. I have taken steps to ensure that this money is spent more effectively and that the problems with cost and delivery which occurred during control period 5 are not repeated. I will also continue to drive improvement across the wider industry, including the franchising system. I will update this House further on my plans for wider rail strategy in the near future. I am arranging for copies of the statement of funds available to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

The statement of funds available can be viewed online at:

http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-10-12/HCWS160/.
Written Statements
Monday 16 October 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homelessness

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I am today updating the House on a commitment I made during the passage of the Homelessness Reduction Act—the right hon. Member for Harrow East’s (Bob Blackman) Private Member’s Bill—to fund the additional duties contained within the Act in line with the new burdens doctrine. Following further discussions with local authorities on the new duties, the Government are providing an additional £11.7 million in new burdens funding, taking the total amount of new burdens funding from £61 million to £72.7 million.

The Government will provide £72.7 million to local authorities to meet the new burdens costs associated with the new duties contained within the Act over the course of the spending review. It is anticipated that the additional duties to prevent homelessness will lead to savings for local authorities thereafter.

I am also announcing the local authority allocations of the new burdens funding. The Government have worked with local authorities and the Local Government Association to test the methodology behind the distribution, as well as the core assumptions of the costs of administering the new duties. The distribution reflects the differing need in different authorities. The funding has been allocated according to a formula which reflects where resource pressures are likely to increase as a result of administering the new duties contained in the Act. The details of allocations and new burdens assessment are attached.

Today I am also launching a consultation on the Homelessness Code of Guidance which will support local authorities’ work to prepare for the implementation of the Act. Additionally, Government will be providing local authorities with an equally distributed share of £3 million to support them in upgrading their data systems to monitor the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

The Homelessness Reduction Act will significantly reform England’s homelessness legislation and ensure that more people get the help they need to prevent and relieve homelessness. It forms part of the Government’s end-to-end approach to tackling homelessness, helping both those at risk of homelessness and those experiencing a crisis. The new burdens funding for the Act sits alongside other funding for homelessness, including the £315 million homelessness prevention funding, our £50 million homelessness prevention package and the £402 million flexible homelessness support grant.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-10-16/HCWS176. [HCWS176]
However, the Government share serious concerns about Iran's ballistic missile programme and its destabilising activity in the region. Addressing these issues is a fundamental part of the Government's policy towards Iran and we will consider further appropriate measures. The nuclear deal does not prevent us from tackling these issues. On the contrary, removing the most dangerous threat of nuclear weapons allows us to focus our efforts on challenging on the other areas of Iran's destabilising activity.

In parallel to agreeing the joint comprehensive plan of action in July 2015, Her Majesty's Government have been rebuilding bilateral relations with Iran in order to address issues of disagreement as well as discuss areas of agreement and co-operation. Both the United Kingdom and Iran reopened Embassies in London and Tehran in August 2015 and we upgraded to ambassadorial relations in September 2016. We remain very concerned about dual British-Iranian nationals who are detained in Iran and on whose cases we continue to press for improvement at the highest levels. Both the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have raised these cases personally with their Iranian counterparts and will continue to do so.

Her Majesty's Government continue to make the case for the JCPOA with its partners, including the United States, and are committed to ensuring its success in delivering both our security objectives and delivering sanctions relief for the Iranian people, while we also work to tackle our broader concerns. The Government are encouraging the US Administration and Congress to consider the implications to the security of the US and its allies before taking any further steps that might undermine or weaken the JCPOA.

Foreign Ministers reaffirmed the seriousness of the situation in Yemen and discussed a new framework that had been presented to the warring parties.

*Libya*

Council members discussed the situation in Libya following the first meeting of the Libya Quartet on 18 March 2017. They discussed common ground between the parties and underlined the EU's commitment to supporting Libyans in finding unity and stability within the framework of the Libyan political agreement.

Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:
- The Council adopted conclusions on the promotion and protection of the rights of the child.
- The Council adopted conclusions on Somalia.
- The Council adopted a decision supporting the UN programme of actions to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and lights weapons (SALW) in all its aspects.
- The Council extended its decision 2014/129/CFSP until 2 July 2017 in order to ensure the smooth continuation of the work of the EU non-proliferation consortium of think-tanks, based on the funds still available.
- The Council amended the restrictive measures in view of the situation in Yemen to transpose an update by the United Nations related to four persons subject to restrictive measures.
- The Council adopted a new EU policy on training for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).
- The Council approved the exercise specifications for the EU crisis management military exercise in 2017 (MILEX17).

Foreign Affairs Council: 15 May 2017

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 15 May. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

**Foreign Affairs Council**

Agenda items included security and defence, Horn of Africa, EU-Africa and the Eastern Partnership.

**Security and defence**

The security and defence discussion centred on HRVP Mogherini and the European Commission updating Foreign Ministers on a variety of dossiers, including the military planning and conduct capability, permanent structured co-operation, the co-ordinated annual review of defence, the forthcoming ATHENA review, CSDP and the European defence fund.

**Horn of Africa**

There was widespread agreement among Foreign Ministers that the Horn was of strategic importance for Europe. Mogherini and several others warmly thanked the UK for the London conference which offered an opportunity to stabilise Somalia. Other areas highlighted for increased EU action were the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Nile basin tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia, and using the EU-strategic partnership with Ethiopia to deliver messages on human rights and political reform.

**EU-Africa**

Mogherini introduced the 4 May EEAS/Commission Joint Communication (JC) on the future direction of the EU-Africa relationship, including deliverables for
the November Africa-EU summit. There were two main themes: creating more resilient states and societies, and generating jobs—especially for young people. Member states welcomed the JC and its proposals to increase investment, jobs, and improve education. Foreign Ministers had lunch with African Union Chair Faki.

**Eastern partnership**

Foreign Ministers looked forward to the Eastern partnership summit in November and discussed how best to build strong links with partners.

Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- The Council adopted conclusions on Venezuela.
- The Council adopted conclusions on indigenous peoples.
- The Council approved a concept of operations on regionalisation of CSDP action in the Sahel.
- The Council approved the staff rules of the EU Satellite Centre (SATCEN).
- The Council approved the High Representative report on the operation ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- The Council adopted a decision mobilising €2.64 million under the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) to provide support to 964 dismissed workers made redundant in four Finnish enterprises operating in the manufacture of computer, electronic and optical products sector.

**Foreign Affairs Council: 17 July 2017**

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 17 July. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

**Foreign Affairs Council**

The meeting covered discussions on the EU global strategy; democratic people’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), Libya and migration.

**EU global strategy**

The Council had a discussion on the implementation on the EU global strategy; Foreign Ministers provided guidance on the priorities for 2017-2018.

**DPRK**

The discussion was shaped by the Council conclusions, agreed in the EU Political and Security Committee earlier in the day. Ministers focused on the threat the DPRK posed to global security and condemned its pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programme in violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions.

**Libya**

The Council adopted conclusions on Libya. With the EU warmly welcoming the appointment of Ghassan Salame as the new special representative of the UN Secretary General. The Council also agreed to extend the CSDP mission EUBAM Libya until 31 December 2018. The Council underlined the importance of operation Sophia (the EU’s naval operation to disrupt the business model of human smugglers and traffickers in the Southern Central Mediterranean).

**Migration**

Foreign Ministers discussed migration, focusing on the situation in the Central Mediterranean route, together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, and the Director-General of the International Organisation for Migration William Lacy Swing.

Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- The Council adopted a crisis management concept for a new civilian CSDP mission in Iraq.
- On 17 July 2017, the Council added 16 persons to the list of those targeted by EU restrictive measures against the Syrian regime.
- The Council adopted conclusions on Pakistan, stating that the EU has a clear interest in a stable, secure, and democratic Pakistan.
- The Council adopted conclusions on addressing the risks of famine.
- The Council adopted conclusions on the EU priorities at the UN and at the 72nd UN General Assembly.

**Foreign Affairs Council (16 October)**

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 16 October. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Luxembourg.

**Foreign Affairs Council**

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include Iran, Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK), Turkey and human rights. Hungary has indicated that it will raise under Any Other Business its concerns over recent amendments to Ukraine’s education law.

**Iran**

Ministers will discuss the latest developments regarding the joint comprehensive plan of action. The UK fully supports full implementation of the deal by all parties. Preventing a nuclear armed Iran is a UK priority for both our security and that of the region.

**DPRK**

Ministers will focus on the threat the DPRK poses to global security and condemn its pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes in violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions. We want the discussion to reinforce the importance of a strong and united EU response. The UK has led efforts to agree a new set of EU autonomous measures against the DPRK set to be adopted at the Foreign Affairs Council. We will make clear the importance of the EU and all its members states supporting the full enforcement in third countries of the measures adopted under United Nations Security Council resolutions.

**Turkey**

Ministers will informally discuss development over lunch with a focus on the regional situation.

**Human rights**

Ministers will discuss the EU’s approach to human rights challenges in bilateral and multilateral fora. We will stress that wider equities in EU and member state relationships with third countries should not preclude
Informal Meeting of EU Foreign Ministers (Gymnich): 28 April 2017

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I attended the bi-annual informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers (known as the Gymnich) on 28 April in Valletta, Malta. The Gymnich was hosted by Dr George Veila, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malta and was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. Discussion centred on Turkey, globalisation, the EU global strategy and the previous day's violence in the Macedonia Parliament.

Johannes Hahn (EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations) also attended. David McAllister (Chairman of the European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee) was present for the opening session on Turkey. EU Foreign Ministers met with the Foreign Ministers of the candidate countries in the afternoon.

The format of the Gymnich is designed to allow EU Foreign Ministers to engage in informal discussion on a number of issues. In contrast to the Foreign Affairs Council (the next of which will be held on 19 June), Ministers do not take formal decisions or agree conclusions at the Gymnich.

Gymnich discussion

Turkey

EU Foreign Ministers discussed Turkey in the opening session, agreeing on the need to maintain a dialogue with this strategic partner. I welcomed this consensus and stressed the importance of the tone of our engagement.

In the afternoon, EU Foreign Ministers were joined by their Turkish counterpart (Cavusoglu) who touched on a number of matters of shared interest, including the result of the recent constitutional referendum.

Globalisation

Ms Mogherini introduced a discussion on how to ensure the global trade agenda delivers demonstrable benefits for all EU citizens.

EU global strategy (EUGS)

Ms Mogherini gave the assembled EU Foreign Ministers an account of the EU’s activity in the foreign and security policy sphere since the publication of the global strategy (EUGS) last June.

Violence in the FYROM Parliament

Several member states condemned the violence in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Parliament on 27 April. The FYROM Foreign Minister (Poposki) said there could be no justification for the violence and that those responsible would be brought to justice.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to announce that I am today laying before the House the 2017 annual report of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. Copies of the report are available in the Vote Office.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Annual Report of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to announce that I am today laying before the House the 2017 annual report of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. Copies of the report are available in the Vote Office.
UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery 2017

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Today, I am publishing the 2017 UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery. The report covers the whole of the UK and has been drafted in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government. This report sets out an assessment of the scale of modern slavery in the UK, and outlines the actions that have taken to combat it over the last year.

A copy of the report will be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS173]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

| TPIM notices in force (as of 31 August 2017) | 6 |
| TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 August 2017) | 5 |
| TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period) | 4 |
| TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period) | 1 |
| TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period) | 1 |
| Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period) | 26 |
| Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period) | 1 |
| The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 31 August 2017) | 6 |

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The most recent TRG meetings took place on 26 and 30 June, and 3, 4 and 5 July. The next round of TRGs will take place during September 2017.

One TPIM subject has been charged with breach of his TPIM measures the trial is pending.

The case of Secretary of State for the Home Department v IM, JM and LG [2017] EWHC 1529 (Admin) was heard at the High Court between 20 March and 7 April 2017. In a judgment handed down on 30 June 2017 Mr Justice Nicol upheld the Secretary of State’s decision to impose a TPIM notice on IM, JM and LG. In the same judgment Mr Justice Nicol ordered minor variations to IM, JM and LG’s police reporting requirements and a variation to the wording of the association measure.

This judgment can be found at: www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2017/1529.html

[HCWS173]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Economic Development in Africa and South Asia

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Over the next decade, a billion more young people will enter the job market, mainly in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. There is a chronic need for jobs and better opportunities in these countries to prevent the next generation falling further into poverty, potentially fuelling global instability and insecurity.

As set out in DFID’s Economic Development Strategy, the UK Government want to support developing countries to transition into vibrant economies and become stronger trading partners. No country can defeat poverty and leave aid dependency behind without sustainable economic growth, jobs, trade and investment.

CDC is central to the UK’s approach to promoting inclusive growth and economic development in Africa and south Asia. As the UK’s development finance institution, wholly owned by the UK Government, it is a world leader in its field. It provides much-needed capital, expertise and support to businesses in the poorest and most fragile countries, helping them to grow markets and create jobs which change the lives of individuals, families and whole communities.

CDC invests for development impact, introducing much-needed capital, expertise and support to thousands of businesses, creating millions of jobs, generating essential taxes, and strengthening transformational sectors such as infrastructure, manufacturing and agriculture. Over the last 3 years—from 2014 through to 2016—companies backed by CDC in Africa and south Asia have created over 3 million new direct and indirect jobs, and paid taxes to national governments worth over $9 billion.

In agreement with my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Elizabeth Truss MP, I am pleased to set out the next step in the UK’s commitment to the growth of CDC, through a gradual capital increase over the next five years. This follows the passing of the CDC Act earlier this year which increased the limit of capital which the UK could invest in CDC.

New capital will enable CDC to build on these excellent development results to make hundreds more investments, create millions of new jobs, and make a lasting difference to the lives of people in the world’s poorest and most fragile countries, helping individuals to find work, earn money, feed their families and send their children to school.

The decision to invest new capital in CDC comes at a critical time. There is a huge shortfall in the investment needed to meet the ambitions of the global goals agreed by the UN in 2015. The UK is rising to this challenge by using Government-funded capital in innovative ways. By investing patiently, CDC demonstrates to private investors the opportunities that exist, even in the most difficult places. This leads the way for other investors to follow, mobilising capital from a much larger pool of private investors.

Over the last 5 years, since 2012, DFID have been working together with CDC in a thoughtful and phased way to grow CDC’s capabilities, better measure its impact and identify the need for the long-term, patient capital that CDC can invest to transform the economies of developing countries.
In February Parliament passed the CDC Act, which benefitted from constructive inputs and debate from MPs and Peers from across both Houses.

In July, CDC published its new five year strategy. This strategy maintains CDC’s focus on investing in the poorest and most fragile countries in Africa and south Asia and sets out innovative approaches to maximise the transformational impact of CDC’s investments, while committing CDC to increased levels of transparency and reporting.

DFID will invest an average of up to £703 million per year over the next five years, to support CDC’s new strategy and scale up its job-creating investment activities. These funds will be drawn down as needed by CDC in response to market demand. The new capital will support investments in Africa and south Asia in priority sectors—those creating the most jobs in the hardest to reach. Capital invested in CDC is invested and reinvested time and again, to ensure that every penny of taxpayers’ money is having maximum development impact. At the same time, CDC is leading the way globally with its code of responsible investing, raising the social, environmental and governance standards of investment in the world’s poorest countries.

This investment is the outcome of extensive analysis and a detailed business case—a copy of which is available at:


I am proud to set out this support today, which will have huge development impact for decades to come. CDC’s investments lay the foundations for sustainable and responsible businesses which create jobs, provide vital services, strengthen economies and ultimately transform the world’s poorest nations, and in doing so, build global security and prosperity that benefits us all.

[HCWS163]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disabled People’s Employment Corporation (GB) Ltd

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): The Disabled People’s Employment Corporation (GB) Ltd, one of DWP’s arm’s-length bodies, has entered solvent members’ voluntary liquidation. Pricewaterhouse Coopers LLP are the liquidators and any residual asset value will be returned to the Department. The company was previously Remploy Ltd and has been managing legacy issues following the exit of remploy employment services from Government control in April 2015 as a partly employee-owned company.

Since 2015, the board has been working towards a well-ordered closure, dealing with legacy assets and liabilities. The last premises were sold in September 2017, and the company’s members agreed to put the company into liquidation on 7 October 2017.

I plan to deposit the company’s accounts for the period up to liquidation in the Library of the House in due course. But I can reassure the House that the directors believe the company has sufficient assets to settle its creditors in full, and there will be no redundancies as the company has had no employees since 2015. The pensions of those who worked for the company are secure: the Remploy Ltd Pension and Assurance Scheme has been sponsored directly by my Department since 1 April 2016.

The liquidators are now responsible for the company, and the Department will manage the contract with the liquidator, who will refer any significant decisions regarding the on-going management of the Department’s investment in the company to the principal accounting officer if necessary. Responsibilities during this liquidation period are explained in the framework document which will be deposited in the Library of the House today.

[HCWS164]
The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government are today publishing a Green Paper: “National Security and Infrastructure Investment Review”. This sets out proposals for amending the current regime in relation to national security and investment.

First, the Government are introducing amendments to the Enterprise Act 2002. For most sectors, the Government are only able to intervene in mergers involving companies with a UK turnover of over £70 million, or where the parties’ combined share of supply increases to 25% or more. This means mergers or acquisitions of some smaller businesses whose ownership is critical to our national security cannot be scrutinised.

The Government propose to amend the thresholds in two areas: the dual use and military sector, and certain parts of advanced technology, namely the design of computer chips and quantum technology. For these two areas only, we will lower the threshold for Government intervention to businesses with a UK turnover of over £1 million, and remove the requirement for a merger to increase a business’s share of supply to or over 25%.

The Government are also consulting on longer-term proposals, including:

- introducing a ‘call-in’ power modelled on the existing power within the Enterprise Act 2002, to allow the Government to scrutinise a broader range of transactions for national security concerns within a voluntary notification regime; and/or
- introducing a mandatory notification regime for foreign investment in parts of the economy which are critical for our national security. Mandatory notification could also be required for foreign investment in key new projects or specific businesses or assets.

These proposals will ensure that our arrangements for protecting national security are more closely aligned with those of major, developed economies, and more robust to the changing nature of threats to our national security.

The Green Paper delivers on the commitment made in the Queen’s Speech to bring forward proposals to consolidate and strengthen the Government’s powers to protect national security.

I will be making an oral statement in the House later today and placing a copy of the Green Paper in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS177]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): The Smith Commission agreement recommended that the management of The Crown Estate’s assets in Scotland should be devolved. It also stated that, following this transfer, responsibility for the management of those assets should be further devolved to local authority areas. It was agreed that the UK Government would not determine how the Scottish Government managed further devolution. The Crown Estate Transfer Scheme 2017 brought this change into law on 1 April 2017.

During the passage of the Scotland Bill which implemented the Smith Commission recommendations, the UK Government promised that they would update Parliament on progress made by the Scottish Government with the onward devolution of management of The Crown Estate assets via a written ministerial statement six months after the transfer.

The Scottish Government held a consultation on the long term management of The Crown Estate in Scotland, including opportunities for further devolution. The consultation opened on 4 January and closed on 29 March 2017. It covered four key areas:

- Vision
- Managing Crown Estate Assets for Scotland and Communities
- Securing the Benefits for Scotland and Communities
- Assessing Impact

The Scottish Government are currently in the process of analysing the consultation responses. These will inform policy and proposals for a Bill to be introduced in the current session of the Scottish Parliament.

The consultation document is available at: https://consult.scotland.gov.uk.

[HCWS178]
Written Statements

Thursday 19 October 2017

TREASURY

Banking Act 2009

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): The Treasury has laid before the House of Commons a report required under section 231 of the Banking Act 2009 covering the period from 1 October 2016 to 31 March 2017. Copies of the document are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS184]

DEFENCE

Service Complaints Ombudsman Annual Report: MOD Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Ministry of Defence (MOD) formal response to the service complaints ombudsman’s (SCO) annual report for 2016 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system has today been placed in the Library of the House.

The ombudsman’s report commented on the operation of the new service complaints system which was implemented on 1 January 2016 and the work of her office in 2016. The response sets out how the MOD proposes to address each of the ombudsman’s new recommendations.

The MOD values the strong independent oversight that the ombudsman brings to the new service complaints process, and remains committed to having a system in which our personnel can have confidence.

[HCWS183]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Antique Firearms

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I have today launched a Government consultation on proposals for implementing legislation to define antique firearms.

Antique firearms are exempt from most of the controls placed on firearms if they are held as a “curiosity or ornament”. There has previously been no statutory definition of an “antique firearm”—only non-statutory guidance. This has created legal uncertainty which has been exploited by criminals to obtain old but functioning firearms for use in crime. Since 2008, there have been four fatalities linked to antique firearms. The number of antique firearms recovered in criminal circumstances has increased from four in 2007 to 91 in 2016.

The Government have included in the Policing and Crime Act 2017 provisions to define an “antique firearm” in regulations. This consultation will inform the content of those regulations and provide a statutory definition which will ensure that old firearms that still pose a danger to the public are no longer exempt from control.

It will also provide legal clarity on the definition of an antique firearm to help law enforcement tackle criminal use.

The consultation seeks views on the obsolete cartridges and propulsion systems used by old firearms that can be considered antique; a cut-off date of manufacture, after which a firearm will not be considered antique; and arrangements for the ongoing review of the regulations.

The Government welcome responses to this consultation from everyone involved with antique firearms, including the police, dealers, museums and individual collectors. We will take account of all views before deciding on the final shape of the regulations. The consultation will run for eight weeks. A copy of the consultation paper will be placed in the Library of the House and will be available on the Government’s website at www.gov.uk. [HCWS182]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Update

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my overarching objective is a more secure, stable and prosperous Northern Ireland. Having a fully functioning and effective Executive, delivering for all the people of Northern Ireland is critical to meeting this objective.

Northern Ireland is currently in the midst of a period of political uncertainty. At this time there is no devolved government in place and there has not been one for 10 months. This is not what the people of Northern Ireland voted for last March. They want devolved government in place and expect their elected representatives to make decisions to deliver effective public services for all parts of the community. Moreover, they deserve to have a functioning Government and locally elected voices representing them on key issues, including Brexit.

Over the past weeks and months the Prime Minister and I have sought, working with the Irish Government in accordance with the three stranded approach, to bring the parties together to work towards an agreement.

The DUP and Sinn Féin are seeking to find agreement on the issues between them. Those remaining are small in number but highly difficult and sensitive—notably in relation to language and culture.

The outlook for an imminent resolution is not positive. Time is running out. And without an agreement, we are on a glide path to increasing intervention by the UK Government.

The Northern Ireland civil service has dealt with the lack of an Executive with the utmost professionalism to date—including in the face of Storm Ophelia. But by virtue of the legal spending limits imposed in the absence of formal budget, public services cannot be sustained without further legislation for much longer. Indeed the limits set out by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 are such that it is essential for budget legislation to be in place by no later than the end of November. Working from that deadline, the Northern Ireland civil service has assessed that it would still be possible, with political agreement among the parties in the Assembly, for an Executive formed in the week commencing 6 November to take forward its own budget.

As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I have sought, working with the Irish Government in accordance with the three stranded approach, to bring the parties together to work towards an agreement.

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Consequently, the last week I could introduce Executive formation legislation in Parliament for an Executive to take forward its own budget would be the week commencing 30 October.

I have made clear that I will only legislate in this way on the basis of a written agreement between the parties. If this is not forthcoming before 30 October, the only option remaining would be to legislate for a budget at Westminster. This is not a step I wish to take, nor one I would take lightly. My strong preference is for a restored Executive in Northern Ireland to take forward its own budget. Without an Executive, though, it would be grossly remiss for the UK Government not to step in and take action to ensure the continued funding of critical services in Northern Ireland.

I, the UK Government and the Irish Government want the parties to reach an agreement and restore devolved government in Northern Ireland. But my ultimate responsibility is to the people of Northern Ireland. The UK Government will do what is necessary to provide the stability required to ensure communities in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged by the continued absence of devolved government.

Next year will be the 20th anniversary of the Belfast agreement. It behoves us all to do what we can to ensure that historic date is not marked by an increasingly hands-on UK Government, but instead by a functioning Northern Ireland Executive.

This remains my overriding priority.

[HCWS185]

TRANSPORT

High Speed Rail (Preparation Act 2013)


A copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-10-19/HCWS179/  

[HCWS179]

Roads

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I am today setting out further details of significant investment for our roads, including announcing the next two major local road schemes and 76 winners from the recent competition for national productivity investment funding on local roads. This funding from the Department for Transport totals £345.3 million.

This funding includes two new large local major road schemes receiving programme entry approval, at Carrington bridge in Worcester and at Middlewich in east Cheshire. The scheme in Worcester will alleviate congestion on the A4440 southern relief road and receive £46.8 million of funding towards a total cost of £56.9 million.

The Middlewich eastern bypass will alleviate congestion in the town centre and facilitate the expansion of the Magnitude employment site. It will receive £46.8 million of funding towards a total cost of £56.9 million.

I am today announcing the winning 76 local projects which will receive funding of £244 million from the national productivity investment fund, during 2018-19 and 2019-20. The schemes will help to ease congestion, provide upgrades on important local routes, as well as facilitating the unlocking of economic and job creation opportunities. They will also support, in some areas, the potential delivery of new housing developments. Further information on today’s announcement is available on the Department for Transport’s website. These projects are an essential part of ensuring we have a country which works for everyone.

The Government announced the road investment strategy (RIS) in December 2014, an ambitious plan to increase much needed road capacity, boost economic development and improve road safety. It seeks to address many years of under-investment in England’s motorways and major trunk roads. Highways England has made good progress on delivery to date, completing 18 road schemes and starting work on 15 more.

Highways England has also undertaken longer-term planning work to ensure that the high level of road investment along key corridors of the network can be delivered in a way to minimise disruption and keep road users moving. These plans also help to mitigate delivery risks and achieve better value for money for the taxpayer. This planning work was referred to in recent ORR and NAO reports on the road investment strategy. I confirm that Government have agreed with Highways England’s plans to optimise delivery of the RIS. This re-profiling and optimisation of delivery is consistent with Highways England’s remit and does not involve any cancellation of schemes, so the regions of England can expect continued and similar levels of road investment.

Further details can be found on Highways England’s website and press releases.

[HCWS180]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 23 October 2017 in Luxembourg. Margot James, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, will represent the UK.

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending directive 96/71/EC concerning the posting of workers in the framework of the provision of services. The Council will also be invited to agree a partial general approach on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending regulation 883 on the co-ordination of social security systems and regulation 987 laying down the procedure for implementing regulation 883.
The Council will be invited to adopt the text and provide authorisation to sign on behalf of the Council the proposal for an interinstitutional proclamation on the European pillar of social rights.

The Council will be invited to endorse: (i) the key messages from the Employment Committee based on the annual employment performance report and the employment performance monitor; and (ii) the main messages from the Social Protection Committee based on the annual review of the social protection performance monitor.

Under any other business, the presidency and Commission will provide information on the tripartite social summit. The presidency will provide information on the Tallinn digital summit. The Commission will provide information on the new skills agenda for Europe. There will be a presentation by the European Institute for Gender Equality on the new edition of the gender equality index.

[HCWS181]
IOPC: Appointment of Director General

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I am today announcing the Crown appointment of Michael Lockwood as the first Director General of the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), part of the package of measures which will create a stronger, clearer governance framework for the police complaints and discipline systems.

The Policing and Crime Act 2017 provides for the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), to be reformed and renamed as the IOPC. The existing Commission will be replaced by a single executive head of the organisation, the Director General, with corporate governance provided by a unitary board comprising a majority of non-executive members. The reforms are planned to come into effect in January 2018.

[HCWS187]

Justice and Home Affairs Post-Council Statement

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): The Justice and Home Affairs Council took place on 12 and 13 October in Luxembourg. I represented the UK for justice day, along with the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis). My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department represented the UK for interior day.

Justice day (12 October) began with the adoption by 20 member states of the regulation establishing the European public prosecutor’s office (EPPO). We have always been clear that the UK will never participate in an EPPO.

This was followed by a policy debate on the proposed regulation on mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders, which the UK has opted into. Discussion focused on extending the scope of the draft regulation to include systems of preventive confiscation, on condition of a clear link to criminal activities, and the application of procedural safeguards. The Minister for Immigration intervened to support this extension, which was agreed by Ministers.

Ministers proceeded to discuss the European criminal records information system (ECRIS) and the proposed extension on the exchange of information to third-country nationals. Debate covered questions on dual nationals and the threshold for the obligation to take fingerprints. The Minister for Immigration supported the extension, and urged for flexibility on the technical detail. There was no clear majority on the specific questions and the presidency mandated further technical work on these issues.

Following this, the director of the Fundamental Rights Agency, Michael O’Flaherty, introduced its annual report on the application of the charter of fundamental rights. The discussion focused on rights protections in the EU. EU Ministers then adopted the Council conclusions on the application of the charter of fundamental rights.

Over lunch, domestic implementation of the EU general data protection regulation which will apply from 25 May 2018 was discussed. I used this opportunity to highlight the UK’s ongoing commitment to strong data protection standards, and that the UK was readying itself for application of the GDPR in a number of ways, including through the Data Protection Bill currently in Parliament.

The afternoon comprised a joint session of Justice and Interior Ministers. The Commission updated Ministers on their cyber-security strategy, e-evidence, and encryption. The Minister for Immigration intervened to support strong encryption and effective law enforcement access to electronic evidence, offering to share the UK’s expertise on working with service providers. The Commission noted that a new strategic framework for EU cyber-security will be adopted at the General Affairs Council in November, and they will shortly issue a communication on tackling illegal content online.

The final item on justice day provided Ministers with an opportunity to comment on the presidency’s mid-term review of the JHA strategic guidelines. Ministers and the Commission were positive about the EU’s progress against existing guidelines, but noted the change of priorities in light of evolving threats. Ministers’ priorities included migration, data sharing and improved links between internal and external security policy. New guidelines will be proposed to the December European Council.

Interior day (13 October) began with a discussion on the Commission’s proposal to amend the Schengen border code to allow internal borders to be raised in exceptional circumstances. As the UK is not part of the Schengen internal border-free zone, the Home Secretary did not intervene. The proposal will now be discussed at a technical level.

This was followed by a presentation from the non-EU counter-terrorism group (CTG). The CTG reported on the development of improved co-operation with Europol. Interventions from Europol, the Commission and the EU counter-terrorism co-ordinator focused on the development of improved co-operation. The Commission were positive about the EU’s progress in a number of areas, including through the Data Protection Bill currently in Parliament.

Finally, the presidency presented its progress report on the common European asylum system. There was no discussion.

Council concluded with a working lunch focused on resettlement. The UK, along with other member states, supported resettlement. The Home Secretary highlighted the UK’s strong track record of resettlement, including our offer of 5,000 places so far in response to the Commission’s latest call. This is part of our wider commitment to resettle 23,000 refugees from the region by 2020. The Home Secretary also stressed that resettlement should be from the refugee’s home region to ensure that we do not inadvertently incentivise illegal migration.

[HCWS188]
Justice Update

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): When the Supreme Court handed down judgment in the case of R (Unison) v. Lord Chancellor on 26 July, the Government took immediate steps to stop charging fees in the employment tribunals. We also said that we would bring forward detailed arrangements to refund people who had paid fees. We will today be launching the first phase of the refund scheme.

We will use this first phase, which will last up to four weeks, to ensure that the refund process works efficiently and effectively. From today, officials in the Ministry of Justice will be writing to an initial group of up to 1,000 people who paid fees for proceedings in the employment tribunals, inviting them to take part. This group will consist of people who have contacted us since the Supreme Court judgment inquiring about a refund. Those who receive a refund will also be paid interest from the date their payment was received.

We recognise that during the initial phase of the refund scheme, there is likely to be considerable interest in the details of the scheme. For those who have paid employment tribunals fees, but have not been invited to take part in the initial stage, we are setting up a pre-registration scheme so that they can register an interest in applying when the full scheme is rolled out. Those who wish to do so can register either by email at: ethelpwithfees@hmcts.gsi.gov.uk: or alternatively by post to the following addresses:

For proceedings in England and Wales
Employment Tribunals Central Office (England and Wales)/Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) Fees
PO Box 10218
Leicester LE1 8EG

For proceedings in Scotland
Employment Tribunals Central Office Scotland/Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) Fees
PO Box 27105
Glasgow G2 9JRX

This phase is primarily aimed at people making applications for refunds in single claims. During this period, we will also be working with the trade unions on how this process should be best applied to applications for refunds in larger multiple claims.

We plan to roll out the full refund scheme early in November. At that point, anyone who has paid a fee in the employment tribunals, whether in a single or multiple claim, will be able to claim a refund.

Those who will be eligible to apply for a refund under the scheme are:

- People who paid a fee directly to the Employment Tribunal or Employment Appeal Tribunal, and have not been reimbursed by their opponent pursuant to an order of the tribunal.
- People who were ordered by the tribunal to reimburse their opponent their fee and who can show that they have paid it.
- Representatives (such as a trade union) who paid a fee on behalf of another person and have not been reimbursed by that person.
- The lead claimant (or representative) in a multiple claim who paid a fee on behalf of the other claimants.

Further guidance will be available when the scheme is rolled out.

To receive a refund, applicants will be invited to complete an application form with their details, details of their employment tribunal claim and the fees that they paid. These details will be verified against HMCTS's records. Where people are unable to provide full details of the fees they paid, or the details they provide do not accord with the details we hold, their application will not be refused automatically, but it may take longer to process.

Where a person is claiming for fees that they reimbursed to their opponent pursuant to a tribunal order, they will be asked to provide a copy of the tribunal order, and proof of payment. In cases where a person reimbursed their opponent under a private settlement, they will not be eligible for a refund; in such cases, the person who paid the fee to the tribunal will be eligible for a refund.

All applicants will also be asked to sign a declaration of truth about the details they provide. Refunds will be made to the applicant’s bank account; if an individual does not have a bank account, they can contact HMCTS for alternative methods of payment.

[HCWS186]
Petitions

Monday 9 October 2017

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Climate Change

The petition of residents of Macclesfield,

Declares that climate changes impacts upon both people and places; further that on the global stage the UK should exercise leadership in the implementation of the Paris Agreement, ensure coordination between government departments in the production and implementation of plans for emissions reduction with particular emphasis on local energy, cutting energy waste in homes and reducing the impact of vehicles on the environment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister to give priority to the urgent issue of global Climate Change.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Rutley, Official Report, 19 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 8P.]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry):

Climate change is one of the most urgent and pressing challenges we face today, and the UK remains committed to demonstrating global leadership in tackling it.

The UK played a leading role in negotiating the Paris Agreement and the Prime Minister, along with other global leaders, has re-affirmed our strong commitment to the Paris Agreement and its swift implementation, as well as our view that the Agreement is irreversible. The Prime Minister has made clear that we believe that the Paris Agreement provides the right global framework for protecting the prosperity and security of future generations, while keeping energy affordable and secure for our citizens and businesses.

The UK has shown global leadership in cutting emissions while growing our economy. We have met the first carbon budget (2008-2012) and we are on track to meet the second (2013-2017) and third carbon budgets (2018-2022). In delivering these targets, we have led the world in reducing emissions while growing our economy. Since 1990, we have cut emissions by more than 40% while our economy has grown by two thirds. We were recently ranked by the independent Climate Action Network as the third best country in the world for tackling climate change, and PwC’s Low Carbon Economy Index shows that the UK has been the fastest of any country in the G20 to decarbonise in 2016.

The UK is well placed to take advantage of the huge economic opportunities of the transition to a low carbon economy. Our early action on clean growth means that we have nurtured a broad range of low carbon industries, including some sectors in which we have world-leading positions. Around 430,000 people are employed in the low carbon sector and its supply chain, and a recent report for the Committee on Climate Change estimated that the UK low carbon economy could grow by an estimated 11% per year between 2015 and 2030—four times faster than the rest of the economy.

Our leadership covers a range of sectors. For example, our financial sector is already a world-leader in green finance. We recently announced a package of measures, including the establishment of a Green Finance Taskforce, to build on our leadership position.

The UK’s International Climate Fund (ICF) is the UK’s primary international instrument to help deliver the Paris Climate Agreement; we are committed to spend at least £5.8 billion between 2016 and 2021 to build renewable energy projects, halt deforestation and increase private investment in low carbon technologies around the world. Over the past five years, the ICF has supported 34 million people to cope with the effects of climate change and improved access to clean energy for 12 million people. The finance has also installed more than 400 MW of clean energy capacity, reduced or avoided 9.2 million tonnes of CO2 and mobilised £2.2 billion public finance and £500 million private finance for climate change purposes in developing countries.

As a part of the ICF, the UK led the way in bringing the international community together to set up the first major global climate funds, the $8.3 billion Climate Investment Funds (CIFs). CIFs have:

Driven low carbon climate resilient development in 73 countries, leveraging $45 billion of co-financing and creating over 9,000 jobs in the Clean Technology Fund (CTF) alone;
Embedded national climate planning in governments across the world;
Shifted Global Finance Architecture and raised global reporting standards.

The UK also leads the world on International Development. In 2015 we were the only G7 country to achieve the UN target of spending 0.7% of Gross National Income as Official Development Assistance (ODA). This 0.7% commitment has been enshrined in UK law since 2015—demonstrating the UK’s moral commitment to help the billions of people around the world who live in poverty.

Our Clean Growth Strategy will set out our proposals for decarbonising the UK economy through the 2020s, building on the impressive progress to date.

Climate change objectives and obligations

The petition of the residents of Dulwich and West Norwood,

Declares that there is widespread concern that the Government is not on track to meet the fourth or fifth carbon budgets; welcomes the Prime Minister’s continued verbal commitment to the Paris Agreement; notes that in order to meet the UK’s commitment to achieve the carbon budget action is necessary; further notes that the Committee on Climate Change reported in June 2017 and concluded that the UK can successfully navigate the transition to a growing, low-carbon economy but new policies to deliver that transition are overdue; and further notes that much domestic legislation for reducing emissions and tackling climate changes is either contingent on the UK’s membership of the European Union or ends in or around 2020, including but not limited to the levy control framework supporting low carbon power,
fuel efficiency standards for new cars, renewable heat incentives, capital funding for flood defences to protect homes and businesses and targeted biodiversity plans to help build the resilience of the natural environment to climate change.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to lay before the House their plans for meeting the fourth and fifth carbon budgets, as well as committing to protecting existing environmental protections.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Hayes, Official Report, 19 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 949.]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry):

The Government are committed to tackling climate change and to the UK’s Climate Change Act. The Act introduced carbon budgets to put us on a pathway to meet our legally binding 2050 target to reduce emissions by at least 80% against 1990 levels. We have met the first carbon budget (2008-2012) and we are on track to meet the second (2013-2017) and third carbon budgets (2018-2022).

In delivering these targets, we have led the world in reducing emissions while growing our economy. Since 1990, we have cut emissions by more than 40% while our economy has grown by two thirds—meaning that we have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation on a per person basis. We were recently ranked by the independent Climate Action Network as the third best country in the world for tackling climate change, and PwC’s Low Carbon Economy Index shows that the UK has been the fastest of any country in the G20 to decarbonise in 2016.

The UK is also well placed to take advantage of the huge economic opportunities of the transition to a low carbon economy. Our early action on clean growth means that we have nurtured a broad range of low carbon industries, including some sectors in which we have world-leading positions. Around 430,000 people are employed in the low carbon sector and its supply chain, and a recent report for the Committee on Climate Change estimated that the UK low carbon economy could grow by an estimated 11% per year between 2015 and 2030—four times faster than the rest of the economy.

Our leadership covers a range of sectors. For example, our financial sector is already a world-leader in green finance. We recently announced a package of measures, including the establishment of a Green Finance Taskforce, to build on our leadership position.

The UK played a leading role in negotiating the Paris Agreement, and the Prime Minister has made clear that we believe that the Agreement provides the right global framework for protecting the prosperity and security of future generations, while keeping energy affordable and secure for our citizens and businesses.

Our Clean Growth Strategy will set out our proposals for decarbonising the UK economy through the 2020s, building on the impressive progress to date. We are working to ensure that our strategy is ambitious and robust, and will publish it shortly.

EDUCATION

School funding formula in Calderdale

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the proposed national school funding formula would see reductions to the budgets of schools in Calderdale at a time when finances are already stretched; and further that an online petition on this matter received 1,042 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Education to reconsider the proposed national school funding formula to ensure that Calderdale schools do not lose out and that no school receives less than £4800 per pupil.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Holly Lynch, Official Report, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1067.]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

The Secretary of State announced the final details of the national funding formulae for schools and high needs on September 14, following the consultation launched in December 2016. All Calderdale schools will be allocated increased funding through the formula.

The introduction of the national funding formulae is supported by significant extra investment of £1.3 billion across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the spending levels announced in the 2015 Autumn Statement. Core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42.4 billion in 2018-19 and £43.5 billion in 2019-20. This will allow us to maintain school and high needs funding in real terms per pupil for the next two years.

This additional investment has allowed us to build on the proposals in our consultation. As a result, the national funding formula will:

- Recognise the challenges of the very lowest funded schools, by introducing a minimum per pupil funding level. Under the national funding formula, in 2019-20 all secondary schools will attract at least £4,800 per pupil, and all primary schools will attract at least £3,500 per pupil. In 2018-19, as a step towards these minimum funding levels, secondary schools will attract at least £4,600, and primary schools £3,300.
- Provide a cash increase in respect of every school and every local area from April 2018. Final decisions on local distribution will be taken by local authorities, but under the national funding formula every school will attract at least 0.5% more per pupil in 2018-19, and 1% more in 2019-20, compared to its baseline.
- Increase the basic amount of funding that every pupil will attract.
- Provide significantly larger increases in respect of underfunded schools, of up to 3% per pupil in 2018-19 and a further 3% per pupil in 2019-20. The minimum per pupil funding level will not be subject to this gains cap, and so will deliver faster gains in respect of the very lowest funded schools.
- The final national funding formula for schools therefore meets the requests outlined in the petition.

Full details on formula allocations can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-funding-formula-tables-for-schools-and-high-needs.

These include notional school level allocations showing what each school would attract through the formula. As the Secretary of State set out in July, to provide stability for schools through the transition to the national funding formula, local authorities will continue to set their own
local formulae which will determine individual schools’ budgets in their areas, in 2018-19 and 2019-20, in consultation with local schools.

**HEALTH**

**Closure of Marske Medical Centre**

The petition of residents of Marske and New Marske in the Redcar Constituency.

Declares that the decision to close the Medical Centre of Hall Close, Marske-by-the-Sea, will leave over 5,000 patients, many of whom are elderly, without a local medical practice, and require them to travel to neighbouring towns to register with a General Practitioner.

The Petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to prevent the closure of the Marske Medical Centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Anna Turley, Official Report, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1069.]

**Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):**

There is a system in place to ensure that service changes are scrutinised and challenged through formal processes. This system is based on the principle that it is right that decisions regarding local service changes are led by local clinicians, who best understand the healthcare needs of their population.

South Tees Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) closed Marske Medical Practice on 30 June after four unsuccessful attempts to find a provider for the service. The vast majority of former Marske Medical Practice patients (approximately 4,600) have now registered with another practice. There are approximately 500 patients who have yet to do so. The CCG has issued another letter to all these patients requesting them to register with another practice and provided support on how to do this.

Surrounding practices are coping with the influx of patients and have increased staffing levels to manage demand.

**TRANSPORT**

**Continuation of local bus services in Congleton Constituency**

The petition of residents of the UK.

Declares that it is the opinion of Alsager residents, shop keepers and market traders that plans to close the 315 local bus service are ill-considered, and will have a disproportionate impact on Alsager as a whole; further that the 315 service should be retained; and further that a local petition has received 201 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the retaining of the 315 bus service.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Fiona Bruce, Official Report, 20 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 1097.]

**Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):**

I recognise the importance of public transport for both the sustainability and independence of communities. Inadequate transport provision is a very real concern and can be a barrier to the prosperity of all.

Where there is not enough demand for a bus route to be commercially viable in its own right, all local authorities in England have powers to subsidise bus services which they consider socially necessary.

The Government provides around £250 million to support bus services in England via the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG), around £40 million of which goes direct to the local authorities who tender those services. Cheshire East Council’s share of this is £347,000. Councils can use this money to support bus services in whatever way they see fit.

I strongly encourage local authorities and bus operators to work together, in consultation with local residents and businesses, to identify the right transport solutions that meet the economic and environmental challenges faced in the area and deliver the greatest benefits for the community.

**Local Bus Services in Torbay**

The petition of users of the No.65 bus service in Torbay.

Declares that the cancellation of the number 65 bus service between The Willows to Torquay via Hele, Babblecombe, Quinta, Ellacombe and St Marychurch will have a detrimental impact on local residents, in particular, elderly residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Torbay Council to commit to providing a similar service to the previous No. 65 service for the sake of the local residents as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Kevin Foster, Official Report, 06 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 275.]

**Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):**

I recognise the importance of public transport for both the sustainability and independence of communities. Inadequate transport provision is a very real concern and can be a barrier to the prosperity of all.

Where there is not enough demand for a bus route to be commercially viable in its own right, all local authorities in England have powers to subsidise bus services which they consider socially necessary.

Decisions on subsidised bus services are a matter for individual English local authorities, in the light of their other spending priorities. We fully appreciate that local authorities are making difficult choices as a result of continuing financial pressures.

The majority of public funding for local bus services is via block grant provided to local authorities in England from the Department for Communities and Local Government. The Department for Transport also provides around £40 million of Bus Service Operators Grant funding directly to English local authorities to help deliver bus services, of which Torbay Council receives around £22,450. Councils can use this money to support bus services in whatever way they see fit.

The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced a number of new tools to help local authorities improve local bus services in their area. Through partnership arrangements we have enabled local authorities and bus operators to work more constructively together to provide better services for passengers.
I strongly encourage local authorities and bus operators to work together, in consultation with local residents and businesses, to identify local transport solutions that meet the economic and environmental challenges faced in the area and deliver the greatest benefits for the community.
Petitions

Monday 16 October 2017

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Bangor-on-Dee Post Office

The petition of residents of Clwyd South:

Declares that Bangor-on-Dee Post Office is a central part of the community and that the services it offers are invaluable; and further that it’s closure will mean the loss of vital Post Office and banking services which will have a catastrophic effect on the rural community currently served by Bangor-on-Dee Post Office.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make provisions to ensure that Bangor-On-Dee Post Office remains open and available for use by the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Susan Elan Jones, Official Report, 13 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 947.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):

The Government recognise the value of Post Office services to local communities across the country and appreciate the difficulty and frustration that any temporary loss in Post Office services can cause to the local community. The network is at its most stable in decades due to the significant investment that has been made to maintain and protect it. This investment has delivered the refreshed customer environments, increased opening hours and efficiency of operation which is needed to succeed in the competitive and changing markets in which the Post Office operates.

The Post Office is a commercial business operating in competitive markets, and we allow it the freedom to operate commercially on a day-to-day basis. This includes the provision and location of individual post office branches, which is the operational responsibility of the business.

Unplanned closures can occur because of a situation beyond the control of the Post Office and Government understand that following the resignation of the postmaster and the withdrawal of the premises for Post Office use, Bangor Isycoed Post Office temporarily closed on Wednesday 27 September 2017.

The Post Office knows how important Post Office services are to the community and apologises to customers for any inconvenience caused. The company is currently investigating options available which will enable it to restore services to the local community, and in situations where there has been a temporary closure, it works hard to restore services as soon as possible. This can take some time depending on the individual circumstances and any future service will need to be sustainable for the person operating the service and for Post Office. Any customers wishing to access Post Office services in the interim may do so from a convenient Post Office branch, including Pentre Maelor Post Office.

Drumchapel Post Office

The petition of residents of Glasgow North West:

Declares that Post Office Limited has announced that the Post Office on Hecla Avenue in Drumchapel is under threat of closure; further that this provides a vital service for many local residents, the loss of which would have a detrimental impact on the wider community in Drumchapel as well as causing concern for staff; further that whilst there is the opportunity to franchise the current office, this could endanger the ongoing provisions of services and jobs in the local area, as well as this branch’s current convenient location in the heart of the community; and further that visiting the Post Office, it is noticeable just how busy the counters are and how strongly the community feels about this proposal.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call upon the Post Office to halt any plans to close the Drumchapel Post Office and ensure that these services and jobs can be maintained and protected in the local area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Carol Monaghan, Official Report, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1067.]

Observation from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):

The Government recognise the value of Post Office services to local communities across the country and understand that any potential change to service provision can cause uncertainty for the community and that some residents may hold strong views regarding this. The network is at its most stable in decades due to the significant investment that has been made to maintain and protect it. This investment has delivered the refreshed customer environments, increased opening hours and efficiency of operation which is needed to succeed in the competitive and changing markets in which the Post Office operates.

The Post Office operates as an independent business and the Government do not play a role in the day-to-day operational responsibilities of the company, which include decisions on the provision and location of individual Post Office services.

The Post Office’s rationale in looking for a franchise partner for some of its Crown branches is to ensure continued access to Post Office services for customers in the area in a way that is sustainable for the long-term. It is important that the business can ensure it has the right branches in the right locations to respond to changing consumer and market demands. Communities do not lose their post office. It is either franchised on-site or relocated to a nearby location, often on the high street, typically offering the same wide range of Post Office services.

Franchising Crown offices has proven a successful approach in the past and working with a retail partner is a sensible response to the challenges facing high street
retailers, with the benefit of shared overheads across the combined Post Office and retail businesses, including property and staff costs, with the host also benefiting from increased footfall and income from Post Office products. Before the Post Office considers franchising a branch it undertakes detailed work to assess its long-term viability. The vast majority of the network (over 97%) already operates on a franchise basis.

Both the Post Office and its franchise partners are committed to providing a quality service to their customers. Overall customer satisfaction levels with the Post Office across its network are good, with levels of satisfaction over service and wait time acceptability both consistently very high. A recent report on the network published by Citizen’s Advice found that former Crown branches are performing in line with or better than traditional Crowns, in terms of access into and inside the branch as well as the quality of service.

In line with its Code of Practice, when the Post Office has a viable proposal for the franchise it will conduct a six-week local consultation, which will give customers and interested stakeholders an opportunity to find out the detail of the proposals and to provide feedback, which can help the Post Office shape its plans. The Post Office considers all feedback received during its consultation process carefully.

**Morningside Post Office Franchising**

*The petition of Edinburgh South,*

Declares that the government has forced a transformation programme on the Post Office that has placed Crown Post Offices and local branches in jeopardy; further that the only independent report carried out on franchising found that the Crown Office closure and franchising programme had been bad for customers, ranking franchises worse than Crown Offices across a range of indicators including queue times, service times, customer service and advice on products, disabled access and staffed counter positions; and further that the Post Office has already spent money refurbishing the Crown Offices it is now closing and franchising, with £5.9 million spent since 2010 on refurbishing the 59 Crown Offices that the Post Office announced it would close and franchise in 2016, an average of £100,000 per branch.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to suspend the Crown Office closure and franchising programme and instead ensure the Post Office works with Crown branches, including Morningside Post Office, to make them more efficient and profitable.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*Presented by Ian Murray, Official Report, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1069.*

**Observation from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):**

The Government recognise the value of Post Office services to local communities across the country and understand that any potential change to service provision can cause uncertainty for the community and that some residents may hold strong views regarding this. The network is at its most stable in decades due to the significant investment that has been made to maintain and protect it. This investment has delivered the refreshed customer environments, increased opening hours and efficiency of operation which is needed to succeed in the competitive and changing markets in which the Post Office operates.

The Post Office operates as an independent business and the Government do not play a role in the day-to-day operational responsibilities of the company, which include decisions on the provision and location of individual Post Office services.

The Post Office’s rationale in looking for a franchise partner for some of its Crown branches is to ensure continued access to Post Office services for customers in the area in a way that is sustainable for the long-term. It is important that the business can ensure it has the right branches in the right locations to respond to changing consumer and market demands. Communities do not lose their post office. It is either franchised on-site or relocated to a nearby location, often on the high street, typically offering the same wide range of Post Office services.

Franchising of its Crown offices has proven a successful approach in the past and working with a retail partner is a sensible response to the challenges facing high street retailers, with the benefit of shared overheads across the combined Post Office and retail business, including property and staff costs, with the host retailer also benefiting from increased footfall and income from Post Office products. Before the Post Office considers franchising a branch it undertakes detailed work to assess its long-term viability. The vast majority of the network (over 97%) already operates on a franchise basis.

When making changes to a branch, the Post Office is aware of the needs of its customers, including its elderly and disabled customers, and works with the new partner to ensure that customer access both into and within the store meets Post Office’s accessibility standards and all applicable statutory requirements. Both the Post Office and its franchise partners are also committed to providing a quality service to their customers. Overall customer satisfaction levels with the Post Office across its network are good, with levels of satisfaction over service and wait time acceptability both consistently very high. A recent report on the network published by Citizen’s Advice found that former Crown branches are performing in line with or better than traditional Crowns, in terms of access into and inside the branch as well as the quality of service.

The Post Office regularly invests in all its branches to ensure they are in modern and secure retail environments. Investment made will have benefited customers and staff during that time and some of that investment will be transferable, for example such as with re-use of equipment and IT.

**DEFENCE**

Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and High Town Barracks, Wrexham

*The petition of residents of Wrexham in the constituency of Wrexham,*

Declares that the petitioners recognise the long military tradition of Wrexham and North Wales and its relationship with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and Royal Electrical and
Mechanical Engineers; further declares that they are deeply concerned over the proposal to move the battalion headquarters from Wrexham to Bristol, and away from the area which has served the British Army and Wales for so many years.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to retain the current 101 Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers in Wrexham.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Ian C. Lucas, Official Report, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1068.]

The petition of residents in the constituency of Clwyd South,

Declares that the petitioners recognise the long military tradition of Wrexham and North Wales and its relationship with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers; further declares that they are deeply concerned over the proposal to move the battalion headquarters from Wrexham to Bristol, and away from the area which has served the British Army and Wales for so many years.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to retain the current 101 Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers in Wrexham.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Susan Elan Jones, Official Report, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1068.]

Observations from the Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):

This decision to transfer the headquarters of 101 Battalion from Wrexham to Bristol has been made as a part of Army 2020 Refine, which is refining the Army’s force structures to deliver the commitments made by the Government in the Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015.

Army 2020 Refine continues our investment in the Army Reserve and sustains the successful pairing strategy between regular and reserve units envisioned by Army 2020. It also maximises the reserve presence in geographical areas that recruit well and has created two new reserve infantry battalions, and a new reserve engineer regiment will be established next year.

As a part of this approach, the Reserve Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) are being reorganised nationally to provide a smaller number of more technical specialists to support the warfighting division. The changes will result in the removal of three Reserve REME Battalions (104, 105 and 106 REME) and the transfer of the functions provided by the headquarters of 101 Battalion from Wrexham to Bristol. All personnel affected will be assisted to transfer to the co-located Royal Welsh Regiment or other units locally.

The Army remains committed to North Wales and the important and valued relationship with the region. Hightown Barracks Army Reserve Centre in Wrexham will continue to home a platoon from 3rd Battalion The Royal Welsh, a detachment from Wales University Officer Training Corps and a detachment of Clwyd & Gwynedd Army Cadet Force. There are also Army Reserve units in Colwyn Bay, Llandudno, Caernarfon, and Queensferry.

North Wales also continues to be home to the RAF’s advanced fast jet training school at RAF Valley, where the runway was recently refurbished to extend its life by a further 25 years. Meanwhile, the Defence Electronics & Components Agency (DECA), based at MOD Sealand in North East Wales, was chosen as the global repair hub providing maintenance, repair, overhaul and upgrade services for F-35 avionic and aircraft components. Both emphasise the continued importance of North Wales to Defence.
The Redwell fields, Wellingborough

The petition of residents of Wellingborough,

Declares that the petitioners strongly object to the building of a 3G sports pitch on Redwell Field open 8am until 10pm weekdays and 8am until 8pm weekends; further that the location is wrong; further that our field is for recreation, dog walking, wildlife, free football and cricket, running and other sports; further that it is a place where families relax in a quiet pleasant residential area; further that the planned 3G sports pitch will mean that the petitioners’ children have nowhere to play; further that the residents will suffer noise, traffic, light pollution and other inconvenience; further that the pitch will spoil the character of the area; and further that the park should not be spoiled.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to urge Wellingborough Council to reject the planning application of a 3G sports pitch on Redwell Field.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Peter Bone, Official Report, 13 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 947.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government:

My role in the planning system is quasi-judicial, and I am not able to comment on specific planning cases for reasons of propriety. Local authorities, working with their communities, are responsible for deciding the best locations for new sports and recreational facilities in their areas.

When they receive planning applications, local authorities should determine them in line with the Local Plan and all other material considerations. These considerations are likely to include any relevant views and evidence expressed by local people, an assessment of all the potential impacts and planning consequences of the proposal; and the policies set out in our National Planning Policy Framework.

The Framework, for instance, explains that planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, sports and recreational facilities and opportunities for new provision. It makes clear that existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land should not be built on unless an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown them to be surplus to requirements, or the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location.

The Framework also sets out that noise arising from new development should not give rise to significant adverse impacts on health and quality of life and that the impact of light pollution from artificial light on local amenity should be limited. All developments that generate significant amounts of movement should be supported by a Transport Statement or a Transport Assessment.

I hope that the Petitioners and the local community have taken every opportunity to comment on what has been proposed.

HEALTH

Glenfield Children’s Heart Unit

The petition of residents of Harborough, Oadby and Wigston,

Declares that the petitioners want Glenfield Children’s Heart Unit to be retained; further that this is a high performing unit and it is vital to retain such a service in the East Midlands.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges NHS England to keep Glenfield Children’s Heart Unit open.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Neil O’Brien, Official Report, 12 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 811.]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne):

The observations are as follows:

Specialised services, such as those for Congenital Heart Disease (CHD), need to be planned on a regional and national basis.

NHS England has run a national consultation on its proposals for CHD service change and expects to make a decision at its board meeting in November 2017. This follows NHS England’s assessment of all CHD providers, including those in the East Midlands, in July 2016.

NHS England is planning for the future to ensure our CHD services are the best in the world.

NHS England’s proposals do not involve the closure of the CHD service at University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust. Rather its proposals for the Trust are focused on the moving of surgery and interventional cardiology only, with the Trust continuing to provide Level 2 specialist medical care for CHD patients. If implemented, these proposals would still provide local access for the vast majority of patients with CHD, who do not require any surgical or interventional procedures.

If it is decided that changes need to be made, these will be managed carefully and carried out in partnership with current service providers, and with patient groups and advocates. NHS England will keep patients and their families informed every step of the way.

It is important that all parts of the NHS work together to ensure best outcomes for adults and children with CHD.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 9 October 2017

HOME DEPARTMENT
Police Pay and Funding

The following is an extract from proceedings on an urgent question on police pay and funding on 14 September 2017.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The Metropolitan police have warned of steep increases in gun and knife crime in London over the past year: gun and knife crime have risen 42% and 24% respectively, and recorded crime is up across virtually every category, which does not chime with what the Minister is saying. Police numbers fell for the seventh consecutive year in July, and many forces are at breaking point. I do not see how asking the police to foot the £50 million bill for the Government’s disingenuous pay deal will help to solve the crisis. To talk about the Mayor’s precept in London is simply trying to pass on to hard-pressed Londoners the cost of the Government’s failed policies.

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which gives me the opportunity to thank the Metropolitan police for its deep and consistent engagement with my colleagues in the Home Office working on action plans to tackle the spike in violent crime in London. We do a huge amount of joined-up work supporting our colleagues in the police force in London to tackle these issues. Taxpayers all over the country pay for policing through a combination of general taxation and local precepts. Given that the Metropolitan police consumes about a third of the police budget for England, I do not think it is too much to ask Londoners to pay their fair share of the precept, just as my constituents have to pay their fair share.


Letter of correction from Sarah Newton:

An error has been identified in an answer to the urgent question.

The correct response should have been:

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which gives me the opportunity to thank the Metropolitan police for its deep and consistent engagement with my colleagues in the Home Office working on action plans to tackle the spike in violent crime in London. We do a huge amount of joined-up work supporting our colleagues in the police force in London to tackle these issues. Taxpayers all over the country pay for policing through a combination of general taxation and local precepts. Given that the Metropolitan police consumes about a quarter of the police budget for England, I do not think it is too much to ask Londoners to pay their fair share of the precept, just as my constituents have to pay their fair share.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 16 October 2017

HEALTH
Mental Health Workforce

The following are extracts from questions to the Secretary of State for Health on 10 October 2017.

1. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to increase the size of the mental health workforce.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):

Today is World Mental Health Day and the whole House will want to congratulate Time2Change on its 10th anniversary and the remarkable change in attitudes towards mental illness that it has helped to bring about. Our mental health workforce has increased by 30,000 since 2010 and another 21,000 posts are planned.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab):

The Secretary of State’s claim that thousands of extra mental health staff will be appointed by 2021 is fanciful unless he tells us how they will be funded. Today, the Care Quality Commission reports that mental health services are struggling to staff wards safely. We have also learned recently that two out of five mental health staff have been abused or attacked by patients in the past year. Most blame staff shortages for that violence. Rather than telling us about recruiting for 2021, what is the Secretary of State going to do today to protect staff from violence?

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Lady what has happened in mental health. Some 30,000 more people are working in mental health today than when her Government left office—a 5.8% increase in clinical staff.


Letter of correction from Mr Hunt:

Errors have been identified in the responses I gave to Questions to the Secretary of State for Health.

The correct responses should have been:

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):

Today is World Mental Health Day and the whole House will want to congratulate Time2Change on its 10th anniversary and the remarkable change in attitudes towards mental illness that it has helped to bring about. Our workforce has increased by 30,000 since 2010 and another 21,000 mental health posts are planned.

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Lady what has happened in mental health. Some 30,000 more people are working in the NHS today than when her Government left office—a 5.8% increase in clinical staff.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 17 October 2017

HEALTH

Mental Health Workforce

The following is an extract from topical questions to the Secretary of State for Health on 10 October 2017.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): There is a crisis in mental health staffing levels. Does the Secretary of State accept that today, throughout the country, there are 2,000 fewer mental health nurses than there were when he took charge five years ago?

Mr Hunt: What I accept is that we have 30,000 more professionals working in mental health than when my Government came into office. There has been a decline in the number of mental health nurses, but we have in place plans to train 8,000 more mental health nurses, and that will make a big difference.


Letter of correction from Mr Hunt:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to a topical question.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Hunt: What I accept is that we have 30,000 more professionals working in the NHS than when my Government came into office. There has been a decline in the number of mental health nurses, but we have in place plans to train 8,000 more mental health nurses, and that will make a big difference.